A Convenient Myopia: SEEK, Shaughnessy, and the Rise of High-Stakes Testing at CUNY

Sean Molloy

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

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A CONVENIENT MYOPIA: SEEK, SHAUGHNESSY, AND THE RISE OF HIGH-STAKES TESTING AT CUNY

by

SEAN MOLLOY

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2016
A Convenient Myopia: SEEK, Shaughnessy, and The Rise of High-Stakes Testing at CUNY

by

Sean Molloy

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
A Convenient Myopia: SEEK, Shaughnessy, and The Rise of High-Stakes Testing at CUNY

by

Sean Molloy

Advisor: Sondra Perl

A great struggle for racial justice was fought at City College and CUNY from 1964 to 1978. In this archival history, supplemented with thirteen oral histories of students and teachers, and grounded in the larger context of racial segregation and exclusion within American public education and American higher education through 1970, I argue that this larger struggle for justice should be seen as two distinct but intertwined struggles that had very different results. Throughout this history, I focus on individual teachers and students who either played key roles or whose experiences illustrate aspects of the larger issues. Some of their voices are also included directly through their appended oral histories, including transcripts of eight video oral histories that are up on youtube.

The first struggle was over unjust admissions standards that excluded almost all black and brown students. Within the fourteen years from 1964 to 1978, CUNY’s student body was fully integrated. The key to the successful racial integration of the four-year colleges was the 1965 launch and the 1966 to 1969 expansion of the City College Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK) desegregation and supportive teaching program. SEEK, both in its practice and its theoretical rationale, directly challenged CUNY’s admissions criteria as biased and invalid. In SEEK, students demonstrated their true college potential by attempting actual college coursework within a supportive environment that ameliorated the pain and damage
of the wounds they carried, respected and recognized them as individuals, believed in their abilities, built their strengths, and always expected them to succeed. Close to 40% of the first three City College SEEK classes graduated by 1972, although none held the normally required admissions credentials.

The second struggle for racial justice at CUNY was over instructional and assessment standards. This struggle was harder for many to see because it turned on many large and small questions of administrative structures, institutional expectations, funding, teaching and assessments. But underneath those surface issues, the same old assumptions of superiority and inferiority guided this struggle too. A central site of this struggle was within writing instruction at City College as the SEEK program expanded from 1965 to 1969. Similar struggles over writing instruction and assessment developed across CUNY after 1970 when it began its Open Admissions program.

Gradually, one City College SEEK writing teacher positioned herself at the heart of this pedagogical struggle for justice. Mina Shaughnessy joined City College SEEK in its third year and worked for several years as a caring and supportive teacher, but also a deeply conservative administrator. By 1975, she was a CUNY Dean in charge of both writing instruction and assessment, as well as the informal leader of CUNY’s writing administrators and teachers. Yet even as she urged her fellow writing teachers to “Dive In” and support students rather than guard the towers, Shaughnessy quietly promoted the implementation of new gateway writing tests across CUNY. In the end, Shaughnessy played a pivotal role in the conception, development, design, promotion, validation, and promulgation of CUNY’s massive, high-stakes testing system, a system that in remain in place 38 years after her death and has now inflicted devastating harm on close to a million incoming CUNY students.
Acknowledgments

I am deeply grateful to the many kind and generous people who have helped me with this study. Most important and powerful for me were those students and teachers who agreed to preserve and share their own oral histories about City College and City University from 1965 to 1978: Henry Arce, Allen Ballard, John Brereton, Francee Covington, Arlette Ford, Don Ford, Jane Tillman Irving, Janet Mayes, Donald McQuade, Sondra Perl, Richard Sterling, Marvina White, and Eugenia Wiltshire. Those thirteen stories are appended here; the eight video oral histories are also up on youtube, and curated at our CUNY composition student website at http://compcomm.commons.gc.cuny.edu/cuny-oral-histories/

Many others who taught or studied at CUNY in the 1960s and 1970s also took time to talk to me to share their memories. I’m especially grateful to Nancy Black, Alice Chandler, Albert De Leon, Marilyn Anne Doris, Fran Giteles, Theodore Gross, Ralph Kopperman, Marilyn Maiz, Rebecca Mlynarczyk, Ira Shor, Paul Simms and Harvey Weiner. Some disagree with the arguments I make here. I may even reopen some old wounds, especially for those who still grieve for Shaughnessy nearly forty years after her death and I apologize for causing any pain.

I rely here on documents from seven public and five private archives. I have received kind assistance and guidance from archivists and staff at the Brooklyn College Archives, City College Archives and Special Collections, City University Central Archives, La Guardia and Wagner Archives, M.E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archives at the University at Albany, Radcliffe Institute For Advanced Study and Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. In particular, I am grateful to Marianne LaBatto and Ted Hecktman at Brooklyn College and to Sydney Van Nort at City College. Sydney has allowed me to haunt her archive for four years. Three of these public archives or collections have only limited access.
I am grateful to Pablo Conrad for giving me permission to photocopy some of his mother Adrienne Rich’s archives at Radcliffe, to Gerard McCarthy for somehow making time to afford me repeated trips to CUNY’s Central archives, and to Allen Ballard for approving my access to his unprocessed SUNY files, as well as digging up some additional personal files that we then added to the SUNY archive.

I am especially grateful to those people who shared private archives with me. Mary Soliday shared the Fall 1970 City College basic writing teacher mid-term reports. Don McQuade shared his CUNY CAWS files. Adam Penale shared family archives about his great uncle Anthony Penale. Noelle Berger and Nicole Futterman preserved, dug out and shared with me the papers of their father, Leslie Berger. Mark McBeth shared his research files with me. (A dozen years ago, Mark also preserved critical files from Shaughnessy’s office at City College. Anything cited here as “Shaughnessy Box Two” was recovered and preserved by Mark.) Marilyn Maiz gave me access to the files of Shaughnessy’s Instructional Resource Center still held by CUNY’s Office of Institutional Resources. Jane Maher gave me four boxes of Shaughnessy’s original files that Jane preserved since she wrote her seminal biography of Shaughnessy twenty years ago. I will soon transfer these files to Sydney’s archives at City College.

My research assistant and copy editor Danielle St. Ramy has provided me invaluable help. I am deeply grateful to my CUNY teachers, especially Mark McBeth and Jessica Yood, who supported and guided me to pursue this study. My dissertation committee members, the CUNY composition historians George Otte and Rebecca Mlynarczyk, have helped and guided me along this path. My amazingly supportive, generous and patient advisor, Sondra Perl has ceaselessly encouraged me.

Lastly, my wife Jodi Magee has made this journey, and all journeys, possible.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Two Struggles For Racial Justice at CUNY (1964-1978) (Introduction, Overview, Methods and Biases)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Kenneth and Mamie Clark: The American Dilemma of Racism (1920-1964)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Bowker, Gallagher and Davis: The Fight to Desegregate City College (1964-1965)</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ballard and Berger: Launching and Leading SEEK (1965-1967)</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Theorizing SEEK (1966-1973)</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The Success, Expansion and Replication of the SEEK Model (1966-2016)</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Volpe and Kriegel: Rhetoric and Writing at City College (1848-1969)</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Johnson and Volpe: Reshaping the English Department and Segregating SEEK Lecturers (1964-1969)</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Shaughnessy Expands Writing, Enforces Grammar, and Validates Testing (1971-72)</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>The Consequences of Capitulating To the Net of Numbers (1973-74)</td>
<td>309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Writing Instruction Across CUNY And Shaughnessy’s Circle (1970-74)</td>
<td>328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>CUNY Administrators Dismantle Their Own University (1975 to 1976)</td>
<td>344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>CUNY Central Imposes a New High-Stakes Testing System (1976 to 1978)</td>
<td>368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>The Tragedy of CUNY’s Myopia and Shaughnessy’s Testing System</td>
<td>391</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Table of Contents (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Marvina White: An Oral History of the CCNY 1960’s SEEK Program.</td>
<td>418</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Francee Covington: An Oral History of the CCNY 1960’s SEEK Program and <em>The Paper</em></td>
<td>429</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><a href="https://youtu.be/rBfCRp0fTkq">https://youtu.be/rBfCRp0fTkq</a> (June 8, 2015)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Eugenia Wiltshire: An Oral History of the CCNY 1960’s SEEK Program</td>
<td>443</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><a href="https://youtu.be/j6zHzSSIv0k">https://youtu.be/j6zHzSSIv0k</a> (March 28, 2015)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>John Brereton: An Oral History of Teaching Writing at Rutgers in the 1960s and at Queensboro Community College in the 1970s. (November 11, 2015)</td>
<td>467</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><a href="https://youtu.be/4QsDDQ3y3ig">https://youtu.be/4QsDDQ3y3ig</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Sondra Perl: An Oral History of Teaching and Writing at City University in the 1970’s</td>
<td>481</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>Donald McQuade: An Oral History of the Rutgers PhD Program, Open Admissions CUNY, the Shaughnessy Circle, CAWS, and the WPA.</td>
<td>490</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><a href="https://youtu.be/x3b4QVNw3RA">https://youtu.be/x3b4QVNw3RA</a> (May 26, 2016)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Henry Arce: An Oral History of the CCNY 1960’s and 1970’s SEEK Program</td>
<td>504</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(June 9, 2016)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>Janet Mayes: An Oral History of the CCNY 1960’s SEEK Program</td>
<td>507</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(June 29, 2016)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>Don Ford: An Oral History of CCNY in the Late 1960s and Early 1970s (Revised 7/17/16 JM Ford)</td>
<td>513</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>Jane Tillman Irving: Not a SEEK student, Oral History of Growing Up in Hamilton Heights and Being a City College English Major From 1965 to 1969 (July 24, 2016)</td>
<td>518</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Bibliography

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter References</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One References</td>
<td>531</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two References</td>
<td>533</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three References</td>
<td>536</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four References</td>
<td>542</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Five References</td>
<td>547</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Six References</td>
<td>549</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Seven References</td>
<td>553</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Eight References</td>
<td>559</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Nine References</td>
<td>565</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Ten References</td>
<td>572</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Eleven References</td>
<td>577</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Twelve Reference</td>
<td>580</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Thirteen References</td>
<td>585</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Fourteen References</td>
<td>589</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Fifteen References</td>
<td>592</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Sixteen References</td>
<td>597</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Seventeen References</td>
<td>602</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Tables

Table 1: English Department Courses Sections Listed in Day Session Uptown Campus Schedules for Selected Semesters From Spring 1950 to Spring 1970

Table 2: City College English Department Day Division Faculty (Excluding Baruch faculty) Listed in Selected Annual Bulletins 1954-1971

Table 3: Women within City College English Faculty (Excluding Baruch) Listed in Selected Annual Bulletins 1955-1971

Table 4: Approximate SEEK Student Spring 1971 Basic Writing Course “J” Rates Based On Shaughnessy Fall 1971 Mid-Term Report (p. 9)

Table 5: Comparable Actual 1967-68 J/INC Grades and Estimated Spring 1970 City College SEEK English Course J Grades

Table 6: Graduation and Retention Rates For CUNY Senior College Incoming Fall 1970 Students After Eight Semesters Spring 1974 With Breakout By High School GPA (From Kaufman & Botwinick, June 1975, Tables 3 to 6)

Table 7: Four and Six Semester Graduation/Retention Rates (%) For CUNY Senior College First Year Students Fall 1970 to 1972, Including By Sex and Race/Ethnicity/Median Family Income of Residential Area (From Kaufman & Botwinick, June 1975, Tables 15, 17, 19, 21)

Table 8: City College Students Completing Basic Writing Three Who Then Took and Passed The Proficiency Exam June 1972 to January 1974 (From Meyersohn, February 1974)

Table 9: City College Basic Writing Three Students Who Took and Passed The Proficiency Exam June 1972 to January 1974, By Course Grades (From Meyersohn, February 1974)

Table 10: City University Fall First-Year Student Admissions and Total Undergraduate Enrollments 1974 to 1978 (Drawn from CUNY Data Books 1974-1978)

Table 11: Incoming First-Time First-Year CUNY Students Placed Into Remedial Courses Based on CUNY Minimum Skills Test Results (Fall 1978) (CUNY Office of Academic Affairs May 19, 1980)

Table 12: Otherwise successful CUNY Senior College Students (Retained Four Semesters) Who Had Failed to Pass CUNY Minimum Skills Re-Tests and Exit Remedial Course Tracks Within Two Semesters (Fall 78 and Spring 79)
List of Tables (Continued)

Table 13: Otherwise successful CUNY Community College Students (Retained Four Semesters) Who Had Failed to Pass CUNY Minimum Skills Re-Tests and Exit Remedial Course Tracks Within Two Semesters (Fall 78 and Spring 79)
Chapter One

Two Struggles For Racial Justice at CUNY (1964-1978)
(Introduction, Overview, Methods and Biases)

In the 1950s, Marvina White grew up in the Dykeman Houses project on the northern tip of Manhattan. As a child, White loved her integrated grade school, P.S. 152. But one day, White’s third grade teacher lashed out at her as White struggled to read a faded mimeograph: “Stand up, Stupid, and go to the back of the classroom! All you Negroes need to move back to Harlem!” Always a good girl, seven-year old White walked to the back of the room; but then she “burst into tears and ran down to the principal’s office to try to confess” (White, 2015, January 27, p. 2).

After that day, White was always plagued by self-doubts “around my being less than and maybe not really as smart or not as capable—and maybe I didn’t really belong...” (p. 2). In middle school, White discovered she was really good in science; she wanted to help people and began to carry around a book: So you want to be a doctor? But when her family saw the book, they mocked her dream and teased her about finding a husband (p. 2). When she was eleven, it became White’s job to cook dinner for the family every night and “school took a back seat pretty much” (p. 1). Soon she was “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” (pp. 4-5).

In high school, White 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; her father had joined the merchant marine when he was fifteen; they wanted White to get married and they feared that college would harm her chances. So, they refused to sign any college loan forms and they even
took White’s college savings as a rent payment to discourage her (p. 3). White graduated high school with an academic diploma but her grades were too low for the free but exclusive City University of New York (CUNY) and she had no way to pay for any other college (White, 2015, January 27).

* * * * *

Until 1958, when she was ten years old, Eugenia Wiltshire lived on Convent Avenue, just outside the walls of City College. She knew a college was on the other side of those walls, but she could not see it (Wiltshire, 2015, November 20, p. 1). Then Wiltshire’s family moved to the Grant housing projects at Broadway and 125th Street. Her father was a shipping clerk; her mother became a nurse’s aide. Wiltshire loved her integrated grade school, P.S. 125, where she was always placed into gifted, accelerated tracks (p. 2). When Wiltshire was ten, her older sister died, leaving behind six children; three of them moved in with Wiltshire and their grandparents. Soon, Wiltshire’s angry, bitter mother began to inflict her pain on her own family; Wiltshire “tried to fix it and be the pacifier in all the disputes” (p. 4). But all this took a toll on her high school grades.

Marked as a gifted child, Wiltshire had always expected to go to college. But her struggling family had not saved any college fund for her. As a high school senior, Wiltshire realized that her grades were too low for admission to the tuition-free City University or to earn a scholarship to another college (p. 4).

* * * * *

In those same years, Francee Covington grew up on Fulton Avenue in the heart of Brooklyn’s Bedford Stuyvesant section (Covington, 2015, June 8, p. 4). Her father was a “truck driver and would-be poet” who had spent one semester at St. Johns; her mother was a factory
worker and then a receptionist (pp. 1-2). Eventually, she moved with her mother and stepfather to Crown Heights, right across from the Brooklyn Botanical Garden (p. 4).

As a high school senior, Covington missed the college application deadlines and her college dreams seemed to be fading away; she accepted an operator’s job with the New York Telephone Company (p. 3).

* * * * *

A Brief Window For Racial Justice in Access and Instruction at CUNY (1965-1978)

In June of 1966, Marvina White, Eugenia Wiltshire and Francee Covington were all New York City public high school graduates. All three had dreamed of attending college, but it seemed out of reach for all of them. Then they heard about a new CUNY special admissions desegregation program called SEEK that had just received a million dollars in funding from New York State. They applied and were admitted to City College as SEEK students.

The City College SEEK teachers, counselors and administrators faced the difficult task of integrating working class and mostly black and Latino students into an elitist, conservative, white college, while preparing those students to compete, succeed and graduate. They crafted an individualized, supportive, yet challenging bridge program that included psychological counseling, free books, financial stipends, tutoring, and stretched versions of mainstream, first-year courses that made entering college an engaging, exciting and demanding experience. White recalls her first summer writing class with Barbara Christian as “everything I imagined college to be, everything, including the teacher. It was just wonderful” (White, 2015, January 27, p. 4).

But if White, Wiltshire and Covington had been born two years earlier, despite their dreams, they would have had little or no hope of attending CUNY or any college. American white colleges and universities then excluded, as they had always excluded, the vast majority of
black students. We now designate historically black colleges and universities as HBCUs. Alexandria Lockett argues we should designate all other American colleges and universities as historically white: HWCUs. But in 1964, racial exclusion in American higher education was not yet historical.

If they had been born five years later, White, Wiltshire, and Covington’s entry into City College in September of 1971 would have been very different. Victories in the struggle for racial justice in CUNY admissions had dramatically expanded SEEK and launched a new “Open Admissions” program that dramatically expanded the entire university. But City College’s mainstream first year writing courses had been abolished—replaced by a new Basic Writing program that placed students into a tiered, three-semester writing course sequence based on their sentence errors in a timed placement test. Student progress through these tiers was tracked by more timed-tests and error-counting assessments. At the end of the Basic Writing course sequence, students faced a new high-stakes writing Proficiency Exam that could block advancement to advanced courses, program transfers, and graduation.

For a few years after CUNY began to desegregate itself, its writing teachers found new ways to dive in, respect their students, and engage in what Toni Cade Bambara called “two-way learning.” They formed teaching circles, developed cutting-edge pedagogies, conducted studies, and wrote textbooks; some grew to be national leaders in their new field of composition and rhetoric. SEEK offered a powerful new model of a supportive, challenging, sophisticated, and psychologically aware teaching program. But CUNY’s writing programs quickly regressed into a myopic focus on sentence-level formalism that was enforced by expanding forms and uses of high-stakes writing tests.
If they had been born twelve years later, White, Wiltshire, and Covington, like students entering all CUNY colleges in September of 1978, would have been required to take timed reading, math and writing tests. If they failed any of those tests (as was true for most CUNY students and the vast majority of SEEK students), they would have been segregated into a mandatory sub-tier of the university, where courses carried no college credit and teachers were pressured to drill students in basic skills because the only way to escape the sub-tier was to pass different versions of the same timed-tests. Close to four in five of all CUNY students forced into that new sub-tier in 1978—excluding those who gave up and dropped out—were still trapped there a year later.

Two Intertwined Struggles For Racial Justice at CUNY (1964-1978)

A great struggle for racial justice was fought at City College and CUNY from 1964 to 1978. In this archival history, I argue that this larger struggle should be seen as two distinct but intertwined struggles that had very different results. The first struggle was over unjust and exclusionary admissions standards. Within these fourteen years, CUNY’s student body was fully integrated. The second struggle was over justice in instructional standards and assessments. Here, conservatives successfully guarded their towers from the invaders within; CUNY implemented unjust and deeply harmful basic skills courses and then built a series of new testing systems to force and trap students into them.

This struggle for justice in instructional standards and assessments was harder to see for three reasons. First, exclusion is blunt and easily measurable; but administrative systems that discourage and defeat admitted students can inflict far more subtle harm. Second, the regressive basic skills pedagogies and tests at CUNY were rationalized in ways that often obscured their underlying punitive motives. Regressive pedagogies could even be packaged in new forms and
lauded as innovations while a convenient myopia enabled white educators to ignore or rationalize the harm they inflicted on students. The third reason is specific to writing pedagogies and writing exams. The harm inflicted on students by grammar drills, error-centric deficit pedagogies, and timed, five-paragraph writing exams were not obvious to most people—then, as now. Perceiving the harm to students required firsthand observation, critical, suspicious skepticism, or a complex understanding of writing theory and/or assessment theory. But almost none of the educators who implemented new testing systems were student counselors or working teachers. Few were deeply skeptical of their own motives. Few had studied writing or assessment theory.

Gradually, one City College SEEK writing teacher positioned herself at the heart of this pedagogical struggle for justice. Mina Shaughnessy studied writing theory and writing assessments deeply. She joined City College SEEK in its third year and worked for several years as a caring and supportive teacher before she became a full time researcher and administrator. By 1975, she was a CUNY Dean in charge of both writing instruction and assessment, as well as the informal leader of CUNY’s writing administrators and teachers. Yet even as she urged her fellow writing teachers to dive in and support students rather than guard the towers, she quietly promoted the implementation of new gateway writing tests across CUNY. After Shaughnessy advised the chancellors that a CUNY-wide testing system would face powerful opposition and be difficult to implement, she led writing teachers to believe that resistance was futile. Even as Shaughnessy knew the new testing system was consciously designed to drop students to save money, she publically rationalized the tests as necessary to serve student needs. In the end, Shaughnessy was the new testing system’s most vocal advocate and their chief architect.
Overview of Methods and Chapters

This dissertation is an archival history of the two intertwined struggles for racial justice at CUNY from 1964 to 1978, supplemented with thirteen oral histories of students and teachers.¹ In many chapters, I focus on a few educators or students who played critical roles or whose experiences illustrate aspects of the larger issues. Chapter Two focuses on psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark who played key roles in the larger struggle for racial justice in American education; before he became a City College professor, Kenneth Clark also worked on Gunnar Myrdal’s landmark study of the “American Dilemma” of racism. Both Clarks fought without success to integrate or improve New York City’s failed inner-city public schools, as the failures within the City’s public schools disqualified the vast majority of black and Latino students from admission into the City’s free colleges.

Chapter Three focuses on CUNY’s new chancellor, Albert Bowker, and then City College’s president, Buell Gallagher, and professor John Davis as they overcame resistance to racial integration of CUNY and City College in 1964 and 1965 to expand access and launch desegregation programs including SEEK, while some faculty members responded with the first forms of academic backlash, trying to erect new internal gateways to constrain student success.

Chapters Four through Six focus on the two key founders of the SEEK program, Allen Ballard and Leslie Berger. Chapter Four traces the story and structure of the SEEK Program in its first two years. Chapter Five reviews the theoretical rationale Berger and Ballard built for SEEK in which they challenged the validity of both admissions and instructional standards that failed to recognize, support and develop the potential and abilities of all students. Chapter Six

¹ This project received an exemption from the John Jay Institutional Review Board on December 22, 2014, which is attached. The transcripts are appended here. The video oral histories are up at http://compcomm.commons.gc.cuny.edu/cuny-oral-histories/
traces SEEK’s amazing success, expansion and replication as a desegregation program and a racial and social justice teaching and assessment model.

Chapters Seven through Thirteen turn toward writing instruction at City College. Throughout these chapters, I focus more closely on the details of teaching, using fragmentary records to try to reconstruct actual teaching choices and methods, including textbooks, syllabi, and writing assignments. Chapter Seven focuses on Assistant Professor Leonard Kriegel and the English department’s chair from 1964 to 1970, Edmond Volpe. This chapter also examines writing pedagogy at City College from 1848 to 1969. While City College faculty always cared about sentence correctness, grammar concerns in the college’s first sixty years were only part of a much more complex construct of rhetoric that included oral and written performances to real audiences. By the 1960s, formalism and direct grammar drills remained City’s official writing pedagogy although new writing pedagogies began to emerge. Chapter Eight compares Volpe with his predecessor as chair, Edgar Johnson and traces how Volpe reshaped the English department’s largely egalitarian structure just as the College began to desegregate itself. Under Volpe’s six years as chair, writing courses were eliminated or repositioned as remedial; they were increasingly taught by temporary lecturers instead of the tenure-track faculty who had always shared those courses—a shift that was especially marked by Volpe’s complete segregation of SEEK instructors from the mainstream department.

Chapter Nine focuses on four of the original SEEK writing teachers from 1965 to 1969: Anthony Penale, Toni Cade Bambara, Barbara Christian, and Addision Gayle, and reconstructs the rich and varied pedagogies within their teaching circle, often through the eyes of their students White, Wiltshire, Covington, and Henry Arce. This chapter also examines how these
teachers rejected harmful, error-centric approaches, refused to administer departmental grammar tests, and challenged the department’s exclusion of Black writers from its curriculum.

Chapter Ten focuses on three more SEEK English teachers from 1967 to 1969: Mina Shaughnessy, Adrienne Rich, and Janet Mayes. It traces how Shaughnessy, as the new SEEK program English director, began to implement regressive “innovations” that restored conservative, grammar-centered pedagogies which she repackaged within innovative forms. Chapters Eleven and Twelve move to the open admissions era, examining Shaughnessy’s new tiered Basic Writing Program, her efforts to pressure writing teachers to focus on sentence errors, their resistance, and her validation of City’s writing proficiency exam. Throughout these years, Shaughnessy shifted the writing program’s goals away from measures of real success (grades, credits, graduation) to indirect, more manipulable measures, principally writing exam scores. Chapter Thirteen tracks the growing influence of the Proficiency Exam over Shaughnessy’s Basic Writing program as she left to become a full-time researcher and to compete for a position as a CUNY Dean.

Chapters Fourteen through Sixteen move to a broader focus on the larger CUNY system. Chapter Fourteen examines writing instruction at some other CUNY colleges, especially the pedagogies of a few teachers who joined a circle of teachers whom Shaughnessy gathered together. Some programs began with grammar-centric pedagogies and began to break away from them toward more sophisticated models. Other writing program administrators, like Kenneth Bruffee at Brooklyn College, resisted tiered course models, grammar-centric approaches, and timed writing tests. Chapter Fifteen follows Shaughnessy into the complex politics of CUNY’s central office, as administrators faced demands to impose tuition and chose instead to: impose Draconian cuts, conduct massive layoffs, compromise instruction, dismantle parts of the
university, defame its own students, and exclude or expel students with low test scores. Amidst this chaos, Shaughnessy actively promoted new gateway testing systems across CUNY and asked the chancellors to use a firm hand to overcome objections to a new CUNY-wide minimum skills proficiency test system.

Chapter Sixteen traces how CUNY Central’s focus on a punitive and discriminatory minimum skills testing system quickly took shape and secured approval with Shaughnessy’s direct support and guidance as she minimized opposition from the composition community and planned and rationalized both the new testing system and the new CUNY central testing unit that would administer it. Finally, this chapter summarizes the devastating impact of the new tests on CUNY’s incoming Fall 1978 students, especially its SEEK and community college students.

Methods and Biases within Composition Histories, Basic Writing and Mass Testing

CUNY historian Clarence Taylor warns against histories that position the civil rights movement as primarily or entirely a southern history (2011, p. 1). Iris Ruiz warns that to decolonize composition studies, historians should recognize the realities of racism, including how racism has influenced teachers and scholars of color (2016, April 8). In 1965, Kenneth Clark warned all researchers against a “professional perspective that constricts social vision” and which ignores both the “difficult problems of the nature and origin” of social injustices and “the many vested interests which tend to perpetuate the problems of the poor and the rejected” (1965, p. 77). A growing number of comp/rhet historians have also considered the tensions between bias and careful uses of archival evidence. In 1992, Robert Connors warned that no “historian is free from prejudiced ideas, but no historian wishes to try for anything less than fair presentation of her findings” (p. 21). In 2000, Xin Liu Gale asserted that: “we inevitably require that [truth-claims] be supported with adequate and validated historical evidence, even when we are post-

Following Clark, I have tried here to add background sections that set out the complex realities, conflicts and interests that shaped these events. I’ve documented my sources and recovered sources from multiple public and private archives to attempt to reconstruct a reasonable, evidenced account. Some of my biases have shifted over the last few years. As I learned more about the SEEK program’s structure, pedagogy, philosophy, and devotion to student success, my admiration for it has deepened and that bias is evident here. But my views about grammar instruction and five-paragraph-essay-timed-tests have stayed largely fixed and those biases are also evident. I have tried to recover and expand the surviving archives of this critical time, to allow better, deeper readings by other, less clouded eyes. In particular, I hope that the thirteen voices of teachers and students in the appendices will balance some of my biases and complicate my narrative.

I draw my lens of “convenient myopia” from Myrdal and the Clarks’ work and I suggest that the myopic racial biases they observed blended at CUNY with academic elitism and other myopias that can be impossible to fully untangle. As a white male who grew up in the sometimes openly racist southern fringe of Brooklyn in the 1960s, I have lived my whole life with the privilege of white myopia, making me a poorly qualified analyst to try to gauge conflicted biases in the actions of mostly white CUNY administrators forty to fifty years ago. But I am guided by many others who have raised questions about conflicted and convenient white myopia.

In 1940, W.E.B. Du Bois allegorized American racism to a group of people who were trapped in a dark mountainside cave behind a thick, invisible sheet of glass while passers-by refuse to see, hear, understand or help them. Even in the unusual case where an outsider did try
to “champion the entombed,” lacking understanding of their experience, the outsider continually
misinterpreted, compromised and complicated “matters, even with the best of will” (pp. 66-67).
In 1963 James Baldwin warned his nephew about the criminal “innocence” of his countrymen
who had “destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do
not want to know it” (pp. 5-6). In 2015, Ta-Nehisi Coates, echoing Baldwin, describes a waking,
delusional white “American Dream” in which “the Dreamers,” who “are obsessed with the
politics of personal exoneration” (p. 97) and protecting their “innocence,… nullify your anger,
your fear” and tell blacks that “you are crazy for seeing the corruption and smelling the sulfur”
(p. 106).

In 1954, psychologist Gordon Allport ratified Myrdal’s research, recasting the American
dilemma as a white “inner conflict,” that employed repression, defensive rationalizations and
compromise solutions (pp. 326-338). Psychologists after Allport have long recognized that
ambivalence and conflicted aversions can press well-meaning people to express submerged
negative attitudes and biases in “subtle, rationalizable ways” (Gaertner & Dovidio 1986b, pp. 62-
64). These individual biases can contribute “to the operation and tolerance of racism at the
institutional level” (1986a, p. 1). Even today, some psychologists “assume that, because of the
historical legacy of racism in American society, all or almost all [white] people are prejudiced to
some degree” (Whitley & Kite, 2006, p. 163). In 2006, sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva warned
of chronic American racial structural inequalities “in virtually every area of social life” which
reproduce racial inequality through practices “that are subtle, institutional, and apparently
nonracial” (pp. 2-3). As such, “in banks, restaurants, school admissions, or housing transactions,
the maintenance of white privilege is done in a way that defies racial readings” (p. 3).
In the decade after Shaughnessy’s death, criticism of her Basic Writing was muted. But David Bartholomae voiced deep concerns in his 1988 “Tidy House” speech and 1993 article (Otte & Mlynarczyk, 2010, pp. 30-31). Bartholomae noted the “saintly status” that had been accorded to Shaughnessy and then questioned whether Basic Writing served “to teach and enact a rhetoric of exclusion and made it the center of a curriculum designed to hide or erase cultural difference…” (1993, p.18). William Jones argued that the racism at the core of American life situated “basic writing programs as Jim-Crow way stations…for… thousands of Black and Latino students…” (1993, p.72). Jones believed that America’s “bedrock conviction that Black and Latino youths are incapable of high academic achievement” distorted both the writing instruction they received and their own self-images. Reading “basic writer” as a euphemism for minority students (pp.73-74), Jones complained that sophisticated and successful process and dialogic approaches to teaching writing and the “accumulated knowledge of the profession” were seldom “delivered in the service of Black and Latino students” (p. 77). Jones urged teachers to examine their own assumptions and question any pedagogy “that situates grammar instruction as a central feature…” (p. 77).

In 1997, CUNY’s Ira Shor—among the Staten Island Community College teachers who resisted testing systems at CUNY in the 1970s—argued that Basic Writing had emerged in the 1970s as a conservative response to the expanded college access of the 1960s, serving as “a new field of control to manage the time, thought, aspirations, composing, and credentials of the millions of non-elite students marching through the gates of academe” (1997, p. 93). Shor attacked Basic Writing as “an empire of segregated remediation” (p. 95). And he mocked the “one-shot, timed, impromptu essay” placement and exit tests that shaped basic writing courses at CUNY (pp. 96-98). In 2012, Ian Marshall argued that “the project of Basic Writing” evidences
both an institutional and American cultural inability “to fully and completely face the consequences of racism…. I am suggesting that it takes hard work not to see this” (2012, p. 60).

Across the early 20th century, no academic field more shamefully bent “objective” findings to serve openly racist ends based on spurious claims of racial superiority than psychometrics and mass assessment (Kamenetz, 2015, p. 41-64; Elliot, 2005, pp. 64-76). In 1940, W.E.B. Du Bois mocked “the questionable application of any test that pretended to measure innate human intelligence” as simply another example of “science made the slave of caste and race hate” (p. 50). Asao Inoue argues that racist structures continue to exist within mass testing, citing research that has found SAT scores to correlate strongly to parental income and education as well as race (2015, pp. 27, 34). Inoue and Mya Poe have pressed our field to begin conversation about structural racism in writing assessment (Inoue & Poe, 2012), including the unfair consequences of assessments (Poe, Elliot, Cogan & Nurudeen, 2014). Yet even in 2015, Inoue observes our “default setting” is to avoid speaking about racism, even in conversations “about justice and fairness.” He argues that a conversation about racism has not yet occurred in writing assessment circles and “needs to happen” (p. 5).
Chapter Two

Kenneth and Mamie Clark: The American Dilemma of Racism (1920-1964)

As a boy growing up in the 1920s, Kenneth Clark lived at 140th Street and Seventh Avenue in the heart of Harlem—directly below the limestone and granite neo-Gothic towers of City College on its hilltop high above Saint Nicholas Avenue. When Kenneth Clark was five and his sister was two, their mother Miriam brought them to New York City from Panama “determined to provide the best possible schooling and life for her children” (Markowitz & Rosner, 1996, p. 24). A garment worker and single parent, Miriam Clark taught her son to read at age three and started him in public school a year early at age five. When Clark was six, a Harlem restaurant refused to serve Miriam and Kenneth lunch; she angrily told them off, smashed a dish on the floor, and led her son out (Clark, 1993, pp. 180-81; Klein, 2004, p. 203; Ravitch, 1974, p. 252).

Clark excelled in his Harlem grade school, which grew gradually more segregated as white families moved out of Harlem. Even though Clark excelled again in junior high school, a white eighth grade counselor tried to steer him into a vocational high school until Clark’s mother, now a union shop steward, came to school, confronted the counselor, and got her son assigned to the academic (and mostly white) George Washington High School (Clark, 1993, pp. 180-82; Markowitz & Rosner, 1996, pp. 24-25).

* * * * *

Clark earned a scholarship to Howard University; there, he grew close with his professors and he learned how racism had affected them. They urged Clark to fight racial injustice; as a senior, Clark joined a student protest at the Capitol building’s segregated restaurant where he was arrested. With the encouragement of his mentors, Clark earned a masters’ degree at Howard
and became the first black doctoral graduate in psychology at Columbia—only 20 blocks south of his childhood home in Harlem (Clark, 1993, pp. 184-7; Markowitz & Rosner, 1996, pp. 26-27).

* * * * *

Clark became engaged to Mamie Phipps in 1937—despite her father’s objection that she first complete her education. They eloped the next spring and kept their marriage secret until after she graduated in May. After Mamie Clark earned her master’s degree, she joined Kenneth as a psychology doctoral student at Columbia (Markowitz & Rosner, 1996, pp. 27-29, 32). The Clarks together published her masters’ research on the effects of racism on black schoolchildren, beginning their lifelong professional partnership (Clark & Clark, 1939).

* * * * *

While studying at Columbia, the Clarks both experienced subtle forms of racism and Mamie Clark faced sexism as well. Most of the faculty doubted that any black student had the “intellectual equipment” to meet their standards. A retired professor was shocked when Kenneth Clark passed a comprehensive exam with high distinction. Clark’s advisers steered him away from working on the questions involving race. Despite his excellent record, Columbia did not offer him a teaching position (Clark, 1993, p.187; Markowitz & Rosner 1996, p. 34). Mamie Clark’s dissertation adviser, Henry Garrett, openly advocated black intellectual inferiority (Kluger, 1975, pp. 502). As a black woman facing a double stigma in a white male world, Mamie Clark learned that she was “an unwanted anomaly” in New York City and she was forced to abandon any hope of a teaching appointment. She began to study the children in the New York City public schools (Markowitz & Rosner, 1996, p. 35). Kenneth gathered data for Gunnar
Myrdal, a Swedish economist hired by the Carnegie Foundation to direct a group of scholars in a “comprehensive study of the Negro in the United States….” (Myrdal, 1944, pp. ix, xi).

Gunnar Myrdal Examines the *American Dilemma* (1938-1944)

Myrdal began his study in New York City in 1938 and published his two-volume critique, *An American Dilemma*, in 1944 (Kluger pp. 313-14). In 1966, Clark would describe Myrdal’s study as “still considered by many the classic work on the American race problem” (Clark 1966, p. 126). Myrdal argued that all the complexities of America racism were in fact a single problem: a “vicious circle” in which the harm of prejudice rationalized more prejudice that in turn caused more harm—all of it grounded in a false sense of white superiority. Most white Northerners had little or no contact with blacks, even in cities with large black populations, allowing them to maintain a willful, convenient myopia. “It is convenient for the Northerners’ good conscience to forget about the Negro” (p. 600). Myrdal found many Northerners who were unaware of the extent of racial discrimination and were “surprised and shocked when they [heard] about such things…” (p. 600). Noting that this innocence was “of course, opportunistic in a degree,” Myrdal found it to be “real and honest too” (p. 600).

Myrdal’s titular “*American Dilemma*” was precisely this psychological struggle and “moral dilemma” operating “on various levels of consciousness” (p. xlvii). Conscious, conflicted and unconscious motives blended together. For example, semi-conscious white social pressures blended with calculated restrictive covenants, hostile neighborhood associations and panicked white flight to create “a vicious circle in which race prejudice, economic interests, and residential segregation [reinforced] one another,” and pushed black northerners to live in poor, crowded, segregated communities (p. 623). In another example, northern public school counselors knew that black students would likely be excluded from skilled trade jobs, and therefore steered black
students away from vocational training in those skilled trades. Pushing students to take the training risked later rejection; but steering them away served “to accept and fortify the exclusionist system, since then no Negroes will ever be equipped to challenge it” (pp. 390-91). Complicating these choices, slightly prejudiced counselors would be more likely to steer black students away from the opportunity, unaware of the harm they caused which they easily rationalized as in the student’s best interests (p. 391).

A Son of Harlem Teaches at City College (1942)

In 1942, as Mamie pursued her own doctorate at Columbia, Kenneth was hired as the first African-American, tenure-track professor at City College (Clark, 1993 pp. 187, 190; Markowitz & Rosner, 1996, pp. 28-30, 33). This was a remarkable and pioneering accomplishment; Myrdal counted only “four or five” Northern white colleges or universities in America that had hired a black faculty member (1944, p. 633). Kenneth Clark would spend the next 36 years at City College, only four blocks away from his childhood Harlem neighborhood.

New York had eliminated *de jure* segregation in 1884, but as the black population in Manhattan swelled from 23,000 in 1910 to 204,000 in 1930, *de facto* segregation became a growing problem. A 1935 Report had found that Harlem’s segregated black schools suffered from overcrowded, dark, dreary classrooms in old buildings, low teacher morale and high turnover, and a lack of “libraries, gyms and basic educational resources available elsewhere in white communities” (Markowitz & Rosner p. 93). Harlem had no academic high schools. Its middle schools routinely steered black students into the two Harlem vocational high schools (pp. 7-8, 93).

The Clarks decided to fight the cruel damage that racism inflicted on black children in Harlem by offering them psychological services; but they were unable to enlist support from any
existing programs. Instead, on February 28, 1946, they opened their own “Northside Center for Child Development” on West 150th Street. Northside’s initial purpose was to provide psychological and counseling services to the children of northern Manhattan. But within months, the Clarks added small remedial reading and math programs after they realized that counseling alone would be insufficient while the children faced “‘daily frustration and humiliation in the classroom…because they could not read.’” (Markowitz & Rosner 1996, pp. 20, 110-111.)

The Clarks Study Self-rejection and the Corrosive Awareness of Color (1939-1947)

In several psychology studies, Kenneth and Mamie Clark studied how racism wounded black schoolchildren. In the largest version of their seminal 1940s “doll studies,” the Clarks tested two groups of black nursery and public school children aged three to seven—134 children from segregated schools in Arkansas and 119 children from integrated schools in Massachusetts (Clark & Clark, 1947, p. 603). They found that the children were all overwhelmingly aware of racial differences, correctly identifying which dolls were “white” or “colored” by age six or seven (pp. 604-05). When asked to identify themselves with one doll, a third of these black children chose the white doll (p. 604). And when asked several questions that evidenced their racial preferences (the doll they wanted to play with, the nice doll, the doll that looks bad, the doll that is a nice color) “the majority of these Negro children prefer the white doll and reject the colored doll” (p. 608). The Clarks concluded: “The importance of these results for an understanding of the origin and development of racial concepts and attitudes in Negro children cannot be minimized” (p. 608).³

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² Markowitz and Rosner 18-19. For the first year, it was called the “Northside Testing and Consultation Center.” Northside has now served the children of Harlem for almost 70 years.
³ The Clarks’ doll studies have been confirmed, questioned, criticized, and reshaped by many other researchers (Jordan and Hernandez-Reif 2009, 399; Kluger 1975, 318-319, 355-56).
Racial Exclusion by White Colleges and the Fiction of “Separate but Equal” (1892-1950)

America’s Southern apartheid systems, including those within Southern public schools and colleges, relied on a legal fiction that had been approved by the United States Supreme Court in 1892. In that case, Homer Plessy challenged Louisiana’s practice of segregating railroad passengers by race. In 1896, his challenge was denied by the United States Supreme Court in its *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. There, the Court approved a “separate but equal” standard as satisfying the Fourteenth Amendment’s promise of “equal protection” and rejected, as a fallacious assumption, Plessy’s argument that “the enforced separation of the two races stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority.” Adopting a stance of convenient myopia, the Court stated that any such sense of inferiority existed “solely because the colored race chooses to put that construction upon it” (1896, p. 551).

In a dissent that refused to ignore the realities of racism, Justice John Marshall Harlan stated that “the real meaning of such legislation” was that black “citizens are so inferior and degraded that they cannot be allowed to sit in public coaches occupied by white citizens…” (p. 560). Harlan noted that Americans boasted of their freedom. “But it is difficult to reconcile that boast with a state of the law which, practically, puts the brand of servitude and degradation upon a large class of our fellow-citizens, our equals before the law. The thin disguise of ‘equal’ accommodations for passengers in railroad coaches will not mislead [anyone.] nor atone for the wrong this day done” (p. 562).

Most northern white colleges did not openly exclude all black students; their exclusion relied on more subtle forms of racism. This racial exclusion was as old as the country itself. As few as 28 total black students graduated from all American colleges in all years before 1860 (Crossland, 1971, p. 26). Black schools and colleges formed in the South after 1865, and the
black colleges produced an estimated 1,151 graduates by 1895, as compared to only 194 black graduates from all white colleges across these thirty years—and with 75 of those being graduates of Oberlin (p. 27). From 1900 to 1950, black college enrollments increased, but in 1950, there were still only about 100,000 black American collegians, with over half of them in black colleges (Crossland, 1971, pp. 28-29).

Up on its Harlem hilltop, City College had only about 41 black graduates in the decade from 1930 to 1939, only 113 in the decade from 1940 to 1949 and only about 30 each year in the years from 1950 to 1965 (Marshak, 1973, p. 10).

**The Legal Battle to End Racial Exclusion in Public Higher Education (1936-1950)**

The legal battle to end racial segregation in American schools began with challenges to racial exclusion in university graduate schools. In 1936, the Maryland Court of Appeals required the University of Maryland to admit Donald Murray, a black student, to its law school, invalidating its entrenched custom of complete *de facto* exclusion (Pearson v. Murray, 1936). In 1938, the NAACP persuaded the Supreme Court to order the University of Missouri to admit black applicant Lloyd Gaines to its public law school where there was no separate state law school for black students (Missouri ex rel Gaines v. Canada 1938). Ten years later, the Court summarily ordered the University of Oklahoma to admit Ada Lois Sipuel to its all-white law school (Sipuel v. Oklahoma State Board of Regents, 1948). In 1946, after Herman Sweatt was denied admission to the University of Texas law school because he was black, the Supreme Court ordered the University of Texas to admit Sweatt to its white law school (Sweatt v. Painter, 1950). After federal judges, relying on the Sipuel case, ordered the University of Oklahoma to admit black applicant George McLaurin to its doctoral program in education, McLaurin was required to sit at a segregated desk outside of his classroom, a segregated desk in the library, and
to eat alone at a segregated cafeteria table (McLaurin, 1950, pp. 639-40). Rejecting arguments that these restrictions were merely nominal, the Court ordered them removed (p. 643).

**The Clarks Act as Experts in the Brown v. Board cases (1951-1952)**

In 1951, NAACP lawyers, led by Thurgood Marshall, decided to directly attack racial segregation in American schools by challenging systems of apartheid relying on the “separate but equal” doctrine. The NAACP lawyers asked Kenneth Clark to assist them. Clark testified as an expert witness, gathered a team of prestigious experts, and helped the lawyers write their briefs. Clark had some doubts “about the legal approach in curing the basic problems,” but he was tired of sitting on the academic sidelines while the lawyers were fighting for change (Clark, 1974, p. 93; Kluger, 1975, p. 321). In May of 1951, Clark administered doll and coloring tests to sixteen black Clarendon County, South Carolina school children between six and nine years old. Their responses “matched almost precisely” the results the Clarks had seen in other children from the north and the South (Kluger, 1975, at p. 330-1). Five trial court cases were combined on appeal. In the Virginia case in 1952, Kenneth Clark, Mamie Clark and former City College psychology professor Isidor Chein all testified as experts (Kluger 1975, pp. 492-502).

**Clark’s Social Sciences Statement on the Harm of Racism and Segregation (1952)**

In 1952, as the NAACP lawyers were writing their Supreme Court briefs, they asked Clark to draft a summary of the social science testimony. Clark wrote a 4,000 word Statement, together with his former City College colleague Chein and Stuart Cook from NYU. They then circulated their Statement among colleagues and over thirty agreed to co-sign it. The NAACP submitted this “Social Science Statement” as an appendix to its brief (Clark, 1993, pp. 190-91;

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4 Chein taught at City College from 1937 to 1950, when he left to become a researcher director at a commission of the American Jewish Congress. (Kluger 1975, 492).
Clark, 1974, pp. 92-93; Kluger, 1975, pp. 555-7). Two of its three authors were City College professors.

Clark, Chein and Cook set out the harm caused by the “total social complex in which segregation is a major component” (p. 495). As minority children learned the inferior status assigned to them by society, “they often [reacted] with feelings of inferiority and a sense of personal humiliation. Many of them [became] confused about their personal worth” (p. 496). These children coped in different ways: some became aggressive and hostile; some became withdrawn and submissive; some rigidly adhered to middle class values, aggressively determined to succeed despite all racist obstacles. Many children reacted “with a defeatist attitude and a lowering of personal ambitions,” reflected in low pupil morale and educational aspirations in segregated schools. Many also became “hypersensitive and anxious about their relations with the larger society. They [tended] to see hostility and rejection even in those areas where they might not actually exist” (p. 496).

Clark, Chein and Cook also argued that white children taught racist values were also harmed. They were taught to gain a false sense of personal status, not based on actual achievement or ability. Encouraged to direct “feelings of hostility and aggression to whole groups of people,” many developed “patterns of guilt feelings, rationalizations and other” protective mechanisms to allow them to deny the “essential injustice of their irrational fears and hatreds of minority groups” (p. 496).

Turning to the consequences of integration, Clark, Chein and Scott scoffed at the argument that integration would jeopardize the education of intellectually superior white children “by lowering educational standards” or would harm black children by placing them “at a marked competitive disadvantage,” because the underlying assumption that black children were innately
inferior had no scientific basis (p. 498). Moreover, they noted that many educators had come to
doubt the wisdom of tracking students into groups by ability because, among other problems,
“this type of segregation, too, appears to create generalized feelings of inferiority in the child
who attends a below average class…” (p. 498).

The Clarks Fight De Facto Segregation in New York City’s Schools (1952-1954)

In 1952, Justin Moore, a Virginia lawyer cross-examined Clark: how he could decry the
effects of Southern schools when New York’s schools were just as segregated? This question
rankled Clark: “Moore was substantially correct: de facto segregation in the North and de jure
segregation in the South had the same psychological consequences” (Clark, 1965, p. 118). Taking
up the fight to integrate the City’s schools, Clark raised this point with the New York Urban
League. In August of 1952 and again in March of 1953, the Clarks hosted meetings at their home
to organize supporters for integrated schooling (Ransby, 2011, p. 36).

In a February 1954 Urban League speech attended by Mayor Wagner, Clark challenged
City politicians “to acknowledge their role in perpetuating a segregated system” and to study
“the extent and effects of segregation in the public schools of… Harlem” (Marowitz & Rosner,
1996, p. 94). The City’s school superintendent William Jansen, called Clark’s concerns
“impertinent and irresponsible and even demagogic.” He defended New York City’s segregated
schools as “a geographic accident” and argued that the poor school performance of black
children was aligned with their low IQ test scores. Clark responded that the test scores evidenced
failures of teaching and “educational rejection of the children” (Clark, 1965, p. 118).

Jansen’s disingenuous IQ test score argument demonstrated how test scores could be
deployed to reinforce racist assumptions about black students. In 1965, Clark argued that such
tests were being abused by the City’s schools to “brand children for life,” to judge them as
uneducable, and to push them into inferior course tracks. Whatever those tracks were called, Clark argued, the children quickly understood the system’s judgment of them and they suffered “a sense of self-doubt and deep feelings of inferiority which stamp their entire attitude toward school and the learning process… But it all adds up to the fact that they are not being taught; and not being taught, they fail” (Clark, 1965, pp. 128-29).

The Brown Decision Recognizes the Psychological Harm of Racism (1954)

On March 1, 1954, Earl Warren, the extremely popular, three-term governor in California, was confirmed by the Senate as the new Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Less than three months later, the Warren Court issued a unanimous opinion in Brown v. Board. It was short, sweeping, and squarely grounded in its acceptance of the expert evidence that segregation harmed black children. The Court found that public education is perhaps “the most important function of state and local governments…. 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.” As such, education is “a right which must be made available to all on equal terms” (1954, May 17, p. 493). However, segregation caused black children “a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may effect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone” (p. 494). As such, the Court concluded “that in the field of public education, the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” (p. 495). Kenneth Clark’s direct influence was evident in Footnote 11, where the Court cited seven social science studies; six of these studies were from the 1952 Social Science Statement; the first researcher cited was Kenneth Clark; the last was Myrdal.

Clark later remembered that in the days after Brown a “general sense of optimism prevailed that at long last the United States was removing legal support from racial restrictions,
rejections and oppression.” But this euphoria did not last long. “The complexity and depth of American racism were reflected in the fact that, even while the Brown decision was opening the doors to the civil rights movement, the seeds of racial backlash were being sown” (Clark, 1993, p. 192).

In 1955, in Brown II, the Supreme Court affirmed “the fundamental principle that racial discrimination in public education is unconstitutional” (1955, p. 298). The Court remanded enforcement to federal trial courts to supervise implementation of desegregation of apartheid school systems “with all deliberate speed” (1955, p. 301). But all deliberate speed would be slow in coming. In 1964, only 2.3% of black Southern schoolchildren in the South attended majority white schools (Orfield & Frankenburg, 2014, p. 10). Over a dozen years after Brown II, a frustrated Court would be forced to order de jure segregation to be eliminated “root and branch,” (Green v. County School Board of New Kent County, 1968) and “at once” (Alexander v. Holmes County Board of Ed., 1969). The Court’s repeated orders slowly began to effect change. By 1970, “Southern schools became the nation’s most integrated” with 33% of black students attending majority white schools (Orfield & Frankenburg, 2014, pp. 4, 10).

**Fighting to Apply Brown to the New York City Schools (1954-1960)**

Clark at once argued that Brown should presage the end of segregated schools in New York City. In June of 1954, he again demanded that New York City confront the reality of segregation in its public schools, starting with a comprehensive and objective study. In December, the Board of Education embraced Brown as a “legal and moral reaffirmation of our fundamental educational principles.” The Board recognized Brown as a “challenge” to Northern school systems to re-examine the “racial composition” of their schools. The Board stated that Brown “reminds us” that segregated schools “damage the personality of minority group” and
white children, such that segregated schools “whether by law or fact” blocked “the attainment of the goals of democratic education.” The Board promised to act “with dispatch” to solve the problem (Ravitch, 1974, p. 252-3).

In New York City, an August 1955 report found that segregated black schools suffered from larger class sizes in more crowded, older facilities, with fewer experienced teachers, and lower student achievement. These schools were causing failure: as students got older, their test scores got worse (Markowitz & Rosner, 1996, pp. 95-98). In the spring of 1955, Clark joined a commission on integration created by the City Board of Education. In May of 1956, Clark’s commission recommended strong action, including changing school zones to integrate students and requiring mandatory rotation to integrate teachers. But white resistance to integration formed as quickly in New York as in Alabama. Both teacher groups and white parents objected. Some Brooklyn parents even threatened violence if their children were sent to a mostly black junior high school. In December, the Board delayed both mandated student and teacher integration (Markowitz & Rosner, 1996, pp. 98-100). Perhaps more ominously, white and middle-class families were beginning to flee both the City and its public school system in large numbers.

According to Ravitch, between 1950 and 1960, the white population in NYC declined by over 800,000 while the black and Puerto Rican population increased by over 700,000 (1974, p. 261). This flight continued from 1960 to 1970 as another one million white residents left the City (Gordon, 1975, p. 38). Many white families who stayed in the City instead fled from its public schools. Between 1950 and 1960, parochial/private school enrollment in NYC climbed from 323,000 to 423,000. About ninety percent of these students were white, representing flight from the City’s public schools during this decade by thirty percent of the City’s total white schoolchildren (Ravitch, 1974, pp. 282, 405; Clark, 1965, p. 116). A 1960 report described a new
public school that opened on Manhattan’s Upper West Side—carefully situated to become an integrated school between an almost all-white private apartment complex of 2,000 apartments, and a public complex of 2,000 apartments housing mostly black and Latino families. Only four children from the white private complex entered the public school; the rest went to private schools (Ravitch, 1974, p. 261).

These two forms of white flight had an amplified effect within the City’s public schools. A June 1960 “progress report” described a massive and frustrating outflow of white students: black and Puerto Rican students were then 40% of the total public school registers and 75% of Manhattan elementary school enrollment (Ravitch, 1974, p. 261). Black and Puerto Rican children rose from 29% to over 50% of total City public school students in just the decade from 1954 to 1964 (Gordon, 1975, p. 35). By 1960, virtually all 31,469 children in Harlem attended deeply segregated grade and middle schools (Clark, 1965, p. 113).

Clark Launches A Racism Aware Teaching Program at JHS 43 (1956)

Clark knew that the segregated public schools in Harlem were broken, serving merely as custodial programs for children believed to be uneducable. In 1956, he started a pilot program at JHS 43, a school where teachers felt helpless and students who saw themselves as failures seemed hostile and hopeless. At a cost of $250 per student, the top one-half of students in each class “were flooded with special services, smaller classes, remedial instruction, cultural activities, extra counseling, and increased parental involvement (Ravitch, 1974, p. 260). Teachers were urged to adopt positive views of their students and new teaching methods grounded in this new confidence. The school became more open to changes, discipline was toned down, and lines of communication opened up between administrators, teachers, students and parents. “Students felt they were ‘special,’ and that they were expected to achieve and learn. Teachers were evaluated
more on their teaching skill than on their discipline” (Clark, 1965, pp. 141-142). A positive cycle developed between morale and effectiveness. “Teachers began to consider themselves competent and their students capable. Pupils were told they were trustworthy and that teachers were committed to helping them succeed.” Soon, drop-out rates were cut in half, test scores climbed, and students going to college jumped from four percent to twenty-five percent (Clark, 1965, p. 142).

A Student Strike Fails To Achieve Racial Justice in the City’s Schools (1964)

On the freezing-cold morning of February 3, 1964, Francee Covington did not go to her George Wingate High School classes in Brooklyn. Instead, Covington joined one of the largest single civil rights protests in American history: “my mother and I were assigned the school all the way out in Brooklyn and it was cold, it was snowing when it wasn’t sleetting and just the two of us formed a picket line at the school going round and round; my mother took off work that day to be with me” (2015, June 8, p. 2). That day, 460,000 students—44.8% of all those registered—boycotted New York City’s public school system as students and parents picketed at 300 schools (Ravitch, 1974, p. 276; Purnell, 2013, p. 238). Covington’s parents taught her that she had a “responsibility to assist in uplifting black people. It was just that simple” (Covington 2015, June 8, p. 2). She remembers that even “at that time in New York City, the black schools got the worst textbooks, the most inexperienced teachers. It was a travesty…” (p. 2).

But the 1964 New York City student strike would fail to achieve integration or better schools—part of a larger failure across Northern cities. By 1960, almost 1.1 million black residents composed 14 percent of the City’s 7.8 million total population; just over 600,000 Puerto Ricans made up eight percent more (Clark, 1965, p. 23-24; Gordon, 1975, p. 35). New York City was by far the largest black community in America. But a third of these black residents were trapped in deeply segregated and growing ghettos in Harlem, Brooklyn and Queens (Clark, 1965, p. 118.) In particular, over 230,000 black New Yorkers lived in Harlem, which now had a black resident concentration of 97.9% (Clark, 1965, p. 25).

Historian Brian Purnell asserts that racial “discrimination in housing was the root cause of black people’s ghettoization in post-war American cities, and it entailed both physical segregation and demonization” (2013, p. 63). Echoing Myrdal, Purnell describes this “ghettoization” as fueled by individual and structural racism that defined blacks as associated with poverty, crime, decay and joblessness—all creating new bases for whites to believe that blacks were inferior (2013, p. 60). Historian and Brooklyn native Craig Wilder argues that in central Brooklyn, housing segregation was “the initial stride of domination” which allowed white people to hoard “the best housing, the best schools, the best municipal services,…the clearest access to credit [and] vibrant social networks that led to employment…..” (2000, p. 216).

By the mid-1960s, even Clark “felt that the chances of getting the New York City Board of Education and its paid officials to desegregate New York City schools were practically nil….every indication was that the Board and the people of the city of New York were resisting desegregation of schools even more effectively than the people of the South” (Clark, quoted in Goodman, 1973).
Admitting Defeat to Segregation In the City’s Public Schools (1964)

Two important reports were released in the three months following the February 1964 student strike. In 1962, the Clarks had obtained a $230,000 federal grant and founded HARYOU (Harlem Youth Opportunities, Inc.). HARYOU then launched a two-year study of the problems of youth in Harlem. In April of 1964, HARYOU published its 620-page report, *Youth in the Ghetto: A Study of the Consequences of Powerlessness and a Blueprint for Change*—much of it shaped or written by Kenneth Clark (HARYOU, 1964; Clark, 1965, pp. xiii-xv; Markowitz & Rosner, 1996, pp. 190-191, 197).

The HARYOU report presented a detailed and damning portrait of the harm of structural racism on Harlem’s segregated residents and public schools. HARYOU demanded positive “educational experiences designed to enrich the lives of young [Harlem] children, counteract the negative influences of their environment, and establish a foundation” for achievement (1964, p. 407). The report did not concede the ultimate goal of school integration; it cited the deep harm to both white and black students segregated by race, including black “resentment against the exclusion, stigma and humiliation” (p 423). But it also recognized “many and continued forms of subtle and flagrant resistances, evasions, and equivocations” had caused a “time-consuming impasse” (pp. 424-25). In the interim, it was unacceptable to allow black children “to continue to be damaged psychologically and educationally” (p. 425). Even though segregation would continue to psychologically damage these students, the HARYOU report essentially admitted defeat—the goal now would be to limit such harm “to the minimum” (p. 425).

Asserting that “no child in Central Harlem is expendable” (p. 417), HARYOU called for three solutions: 1) new Harlem preschools for 4,000 children to be locally controlled by a local “Central Harlem Council” (pp. 407-415), 2) after school tutoring centers for 18,000 public
school students (pp. 415-21), and 3) a reorganization of the Harlem schools themselves, which
the report called “monuments of long-standing neglect and educational stagnation” (p. 422) with
“a history of criminal educational neglect” (p. 423) which victimized students with “woefully
inferior…teaching” (p. 425) and were “contaminated by the moral sickness of racism” (p. 426),
all of which rendered the schools “accessories to the reinforcement of a system of cruelty,
injustice and arbitrary rejection which spawns human casualties and social pathology” (p. 427).
The report dismissed arguments that blamed these failures on cultural deprivation as merely
updated arguments of innate racial inferiority, both of which arguments led to: “the development
and implementation of educational procedures which stunt the ability of the child to learn and
result in the self-fulfilling prophecy that he does not learn. If it is assumed that a child cannot
learn, and if he is treated as if he cannot learn, he will not learn” (p. 431).

HARYOU’s solutions all called for sophisticated, creative new models of teaching and
relevant, challenging, exciting curricula. In the after-school programs, HARYOU doubted that
“submitting the child who has already experienced defeat in school to the same teachers,
techniques, classroom settings, and general atmosphere, is likely to result in any great
educational achievement” (p. 415-16). Noting that deficient education impaired students’
“natural curiosity and desire to learn,” HARYOU proposed “revised curricula, advanced
teaching techniques and materials, a stimulating atmosphere, and generally increased
motivation” (p. 416-17). In particular, HARYOU called for materials that emphasized “the
overall civil rights struggle, the role of the Negro in American culture, and the emergence of new
nations in Africa and Asia…” (p. 420). In the reorganized schools, HARYOU called for
incentives to recruit master teachers with “human understanding” (p. 437), offering extra pay for
superior skill and responsibility and “objective appraisal of professional performance” (p 438).
Only weeks after the April 1964 HARYOU report, the City’s Board of Education released its “Allen Report” which harshly criticized the completely ineffectual actions of the Board over the previous decade—although it absolved them of intentional segregation. But Ravitch noted that the Allen report did not even propose either City-wide school integration or any form of forced integration. Endorsing only voluntary actions, and anticipating that black and Latino students would reach 70-75% of total City public school enrollment by 1980, the Allen Report essentially admitted defeat (Ravitch, 1974, pp. 280-82, 286).

Clark Introduces Martin Luther King (December 1956)

On December 15, 1956, Clark introduced a 27-year-old rising civil rights leader from Alabama to speak at a luncheon of the “National Committee For Rural Schools,” held in mid-town Manhattan’s stately old Commodore Hotel. Martin Luther King rose and told his New York audience that he wanted “to speak about desegregation and the future” (p. 472).

King praised Brown as a “glorious daybreak to end the long night of human captivity” (p. 472). King thanked Clark, along with other psychologists who had studied the ways segregated education systems harm children—“Because the Negro child forever stands before a system that stares him in the face saying, ‘You are not equal to; you do not belong; you cannot be.’ Segregation distorts the personality of the segregated as well as the segregator” (p. 474). King argued that there are “three basic reasons why segregation is evil” (p. 472). First, King echoed Brown’s finding that separate is inherently and inevitably unequal (p. 473). Second, King echoed the work of Clark and other social scientists that “segregation is evil because it scars the souls of both the segregated and the segregator….It gives the segregated a false sense of inferiority and the segregator a false sense of superiority. It is equally damaging” (p. 473). Third, King argued that segregation in the end always depersonalizes the segregated person “into merely a thing to
be used, not a person to be respected. He is merely a depersonalized cog in a vast economic machine” (p. 474).

King warned that there would be growing, defiant and determined resistance to integration (p. 475). He reminded his New York audience that the fight for integration was not only in the South: “we must face the tragic fact that we are far from the promised land in the struggle for a desegregated society. Segregation is still a glaring fact in America. Yes, we still confront it in the South in its glaring and conspicuous forms. We still confront it in the North in its hidden and subtle forms” (p. 475). In closing, King called for all black people to “rise up and protest courageously wherever we find segregation…. I realize this will mean suffering and sacrifice…. It might even mean physical death. But as Dr. Kenneth Clark said in a speech here last year, if physical death is the price that some must pay to free their children from a life of permanent psychological death, then nothing could be more honorable” (p. 478).

For almost thirty years, the Clarks’ research and work had shown that Northern and Southern black children were all deeply harmed by racism, and nowhere was that more true than Clark’s own Harlem. When the unanimous Court cited Clark and Myrdal’s work in support of its conclusion in *Brown* that “separate is inherently unequal,” King, Clark-- and many others-- read those words as a denunciation of all segregation, including its hidden and subtle Northern forms.

Despite the Supreme Court’s warning in *Brown* that no “child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education” (1954, p. 493) and its admonition that education is “a right which must be made available to all on equal terms,” (1954, p. 493) Clark knew that the poor black and Latino sons and daughters of New York City were being denied access to this critical opportunity and this basic right—including within his own
college. The granite and limestone towers of City College loomed over Harlem, telling its children that they were not equal to white students; they did not belong; they could not be.

In the spring of 1964, the HARYOU and Allen reports both essentially admitted that white backlash, white flight, and structural racism had succeeded. The promise of Brown to end the devastating harm of segregation on children would be forever broken in New York City. Instead, the City’s school system would continue to wound and fail its black and Latino students. Atop this obdurately racist foundation sat the City’s public university. For over a century the City’s public colleges had been uniquely connected to and reliant on the City’s public schools to grade, sort, endorse and effectively select its potential incoming students. If the New York City public school system was deeply contaminated by racism—and by 1964, there could be few doubts—then the City’s public college admissions system was equally contaminated. The vast majority of black and Latino City public school students who were segregated, stigmatized, poorly-taught, discouraged, written-off, steered away from academic courses, and even judged as uneducable by the City’s schools—almost all of those students then fell prey to the subtle, systemic barriers of CUNY’s “neutral” admissions standards.

Once it was clear that the City’s public schools would not repair and reform themselves, the only hope for hundreds of thousands of sons and daughters of New York City was that the City University could repair and reform itself—both to offer them truly equitable access and to try to compensate for the all the wounds already inflicted on them. Yet, even while Clark fought tirelessly against segregation in the City’s public schools, he was quiet about the exclusion of black students from the City’s public colleges. Much later, Clark himself wondered why “my racial hostility did not spill over into my relationship with my colleagues at City College.” He
noted that his colleagues had been empathetic and supportive. The college had treated him well.

“I was granted tenure and promoted at appropriate times” (Clark, 1993, pp. 189-90).

Caught up in many other bruising battles, Clark would support and influence, but never lead, the battle to integrate his own City College. Leadership in that fight would fall to two unlikely partners: Allen B. Ballard, an angry young historian who had grown up within the overt racism of a segregated Philadelphia, and Leslie Berger, a defensive clinical psychologist who had survived the Holocaust, immigrated penniless and alone to New York City, and worked his way through Brooklyn College night school while he learned English.

But before Ballard and Berger could launch their desegregation program at City College, other educators would have to struggle to overcome the convenient myopia that produced deeply ingrained resistance among the conservative and elitist City College faculty.
Chapter Three

BOWKER, GALLAGHER AND DAVIS:
The Fight to Desegregate City College (1964-1965)

Buell G. Gallagher was born in Rankin, Illinois in 1904, the son of a Congregationalist minister. After earning his B.A. from Carlton College in Minnesota, Gallagher came to New York to study theology. After he graduated from Union Theological seminary in 1929, Gallagher was ordained, and he served briefly as a pastor in Passaic, New Jersey. In 1932, at age 29, Gallagher accepted the presidency of Talladega College, a 300 student, black liberal arts school in rural Alabama (Swietnicki, 1952, September 22; Gallagher, “About the Author” 1974). Gallagher led Talladega for ten years while earning his Ph.D. from Columbia. His doctoral thesis became his first book, American Caste and The Negro College, a meta-study of racial caste and prejudice in America written from the perspective of a white president of a black college. Writing six years before Myrdal’s study, Gallagher argued that “[our] caste-controlled America” offered blacks only two alternatives: “servitude or mutiny.” Change would require “a profound shift in individual and group attitudes” grounded in new experiences. But Gallagher believed that colleges could be “a center of emancipation. In the widest and most inclusive sense of the term, education is the best answer to the challenge of caste” (Gallagher, Preface, 1938).

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Albert Hosmer Bowker was born on September 8, 1919 in Winchendon, Massachusetts and his family spent many summers at nearby Baldwinville. But his father worked as a research scientist for National Bureau of Standards, so Bowker grew up in the racially segregated Washington, D.C., where in 1937 he graduated as the salutatorian of Woodrow Wilson High School. Bowker entered M.I.T. that fall. “My original idea was to become an engineer of some sort…. But finally discouraged largely by a drafting and chemistry laboratory, I decided that I
wasn’t inclined enough mechanically to become an engineer. I then transferred to mathematics.” (In memoriam, 2008; Olkin & Bowker, 1987, p. 472).

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A soft-spoken southerner and political scientist, John Aubrey Davis also grew up in Washington D.C., where in the 1930s he organized effective black boycotts of racist white businesses, setting off a legal fight that ended in a 1938 Supreme Court victory upholding the picketing rights of civil rights protesters, *New Negro Alliance v. Sanitary Grocery, Co., Inc.* Davis then became a political science professor at Lincoln University (Saxon, 2002, December 21; Kluger, 1975, p. 619).

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Gallagher moved to Berkeley and became a professor of Christian ethics at the Pacific School of Religion where he completed his second book, published in 1946, *Color and Conscience: The Irrepressible Conflict.* There, Gallagher argued that Christian ethics required individuals to work against America’s “racial caste system,” which was grounded in a “delusion of superiority” (pp. 2-3). Writing almost a decade before *Brown*, Gallagher rejected Northern “complacency” (pp. 225-26) and called for Americans in all regions, as a matter of Christian ethics, to work “for ‘equal and unsegregated opportunity’ to replace the hypocrisy of [a] ‘separate but equal’ evasion of conscience…” (p. 221). Yet when Gallagher was named the president of City College in 1952, he found himself leading an almost completely white institution (Swietnicki, 1952, September 22). Kenneth Clark, then in the midst of his work on the *Brown* case, was still its only regular black faculty member.

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After graduating M.I.T. with his mathematics degree in 1941, Bowker worked on military problems as part of Columbia’s Statistical Research Group during World War II. Bowker earned his Ph.D. at Columbia in 1949 (In memoriam, 2008). But after the war, Bowker went to Stanford where he helped found a new department in Statistics and was named its first chairman, although he was still “technically a graduate student at Columbia” (Olkin & Bowker, 1987, pp. 473-475). In 1956, Bowker decided to pursue a career in college administration and soon became Stanford’s Graduate Dean (p. 478).

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Beginning in mid-1953, Davis joined the Clarks on the NAACP Brown team. He led a large team of academics who assembled historical evidence regarding the intended application of the Fourteenth Amendment to segregated education. That same year, City College hired Davis as its second black faculty member (Ballard, 2011, p. 212; Kluger, 1975, pp. 619-626).

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In the early 1960s, Bowker advised CUNY on the development of its new Ph.D. program. In 1963, CUNY’s Board conducted a search for a new chancellor. They considered Gallagher, but became deadlocked. Hunter mathematician Mina Rees suggested Bowker and the Board chose him in part due to his experience with graduate work (Buder, 1963; Olkin & Bowker, 1987, p. 480). But Bowker knew “the real problem was expansion… [CUNY] had talked about it but it hadn’t been done” (Olkin & Bowker, 1987, p. 481). In particular, Bowker was troubled by City College’s intransigence. “It just isn’t appropriate to run an elitist public institution that is primarily white in the middle of Harlem, in my view anyway” (p. 481).

* * * * *
**Subtle Racial Exclusion at City College (1954-1964)**

In theory, black and Puerto Rican New York City high school students had equal access to City College. But in practice, only a token few were admitted. Gallagher was a lifelong, committed opponent of racism. Yet for thirteen years after he became the president of City College, almost nothing changed. From 1954 to 1964, black and Puerto Rican children rose from 29% to over 50% of total New York City public school students (Gordon, 1975, p. 35). By 1960, black and Puerto Rican students made up 75% of Manhattan elementary school enrollment (Ravitch, 1974, p. 261). Virtually all of them continued to be excluded from the City’s tuition-free colleges, especially its four-year colleges: City, Hunter, Brooklyn and Queens.

In 1963, Republican Assembly Speaker Joseph Carlino directly charged CUNY with unfair racial exclusion. According to Carlino, “only 1.9 per cent of the [CUNY] student body was Negro.” As such, CUNY “had become a haven for the elite,” with high GPA requirements that forced black and Latino students “to forgo college” (Currivan, 1963, November 27). In the mid-1960s CUNY’s student body was “by all accounts” 94 to 97% white (Warren, 1984, pp. 2, 35). Even in 1967, only 3.6% of CUNY senior college matriculants were black and only 1.6% were Puerto Rican—at a time when black and Puerto Rican students comprised 57% of all City public elementary students and 38% of high school students (Berger, 1973, September 10, p. 5).

This *de facto* racial exclusion was then the norm at America’s white colleges. In 1960 there were only 70,000 black students at all white colleges comprising only 2.4% of the total white college enrollment of 2.8 million. But African-Americans constituted close to 13% of the

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5 Relying on a Ford Foundation study, The New York Times reported 200,000 total 1960 black college students with 130,000 of those in black colleges (Hechinger, 1971, October 11). The study itself set the total at 195,000 to 205,000 (Crossland, 1971, p. 29). A 1962 U.S. Census Report lists a total in 1960 of 2.9 million American college students in, including 2.7 million white students and 192,000 “nonwhite” students (pp. 1-2).
college age population, such that their equal proportional representation in white colleges would have been 364,000. This de facto racial exclusion extended to faculty members as well. Myrdal had reported in 1944 that only “four or five” Northern white colleges or universities had hired a black faculty member (p. 633). In 1960, there still were no more than 200 black faculty members in American white colleges, with none at all at Harvard or Yale (Ballard, 1973, p. 44) and there were only about 30 black professors among 3,000 tenured faculty members in CUNY’s senior colleges (Berger, 1973, September 10, p. 5).

While the injustice of de facto racial exclusion at white colleges was ubiquitous, it was nowhere as glaringly obvious or as deeply and sadly ironic as at City College’s hilltop campus sitting directly above central Harlem. Founded in 1847, City College was by far the oldest college within the newly formed CUNY, and its reputation had been brightly burnished by its history of struggle for social justice and its rejection of intolerance. City had operated with an open admissions policy for two decades after 1900, until its limited capacity had forced adoption of selective admissions criteria (Healy, 1969, December). For decades, promising Jewish students “came to [City] because, in the ignorance and bigotry of their times, there were no other avenues of higher education open to them” (Healy, 1969, December). In the 1930’s, City was labeled the “Little Red School House” for its embrace of oppositional politics and anti-war protests; City students and faculty were subjected to anti-communist purges in the 1940s and 1950s (Smith, 2011; Raab 2009, November 6; Kriegel 1972, pp.169-70). In April of 1949, one of

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6 1960 U.S. Census counted black Americans as 10.5% of total American residents (U.S. Census 1961, pp. 5, 26). But, the median age of Blacks was lower than whites, making them (in 1970) two to three percent more of the college age population (Crossland, 1971, p. 10-17). Crossland also found that black, Latino, and Native American students were all deeply underrepresented in American colleges in 1970 (1971, pp.13-18).
the first American college civil rights demonstrations erupted at City College. But in the spring of 1965, more than ten years after Brown, City College still sat like “a white colony” on its hilltop over central Harlem (Ballard, 2014, p. 2). Each day, streams of white students emerged from the 137th Street and Broadway subway entrance and climbed the hill to the iron gates of City’s cloistered, hilltop towers.

Growing Pressures For Broader and Fairer Access in the New CUNY System (1960-1964)

From the 1930s until 1957, New York City’s public colleges (City, Brooklyn, Hunter, and Queens) had operated as four largely autonomous colleges, loosely overseen by a Board of Higher Education appointed by the Mayor (Gordon, 1975, p. 21-24). In the late 1950s, New York City established its first community colleges: Staten Island (1955), Bronx (1957) and Queensborough (1958) (Gordon, 1975, pp. 78-79; Board, 1964, June, p. 17). But the municipal colleges only became a single system in 1961, after the Heald Commission (a three person panel appointed by the newly elected Governor Nelson Rockefeller, and headed by former NYU Chancellor Henry Heald) recommended massive expansions of the New York State and New York City university systems (Hechinger, 1960, November 16, pp. 1, 57; Gordon, 1975, pp. 82-83). The Heald Report called for an increase in annual State funding for higher education from $300 million to as much as $1.2 billion by 1975 and for doubling the number of all New York college students from 401,000 to 804,000 by 1970. It also proposed that all public colleges charge an equal amount of tuition with a system of tuition rebates to students of families earning less than $5,000 a year, and that Albany appoint representatives to CUNY’s Board (Hechinger, 1960, November 16; Gordon, 1975, pp. 82-83).

7 Thousands of students protesting faculty anti-Semitism and racism refused to attend classes. Hundreds of students picketed. There were clashes with police, and seventeen students were arrested (Goodman, 1984, April 16).
On April 11, 1961, Rockefeller signed the law that created CUNY; its seven colleges
(City, Hunter, Brooklyn, Queens, SICC, BCC and QCC) had a total of 91,000 students and 2,200
full-time teachers (CUNY, 2011). CUNY’s Board appointed John Rutherford Everett as its first
full-time Chancellor (CUNY, 2011; Gordon, 1975, pp. 36, 82).

During the 1960s, state funding for CUNY climbed quickly, increasing Albany’s
leverage over the system. In 1960, Albany doubled its share of support for the City’s four-year
colleges (Gordon, 1975, p. 84). Total state support for CUNY senior college students climbed
from $2.7 million in 1959-60 to $5.5 million in 1963-64 (Board, 1964, June, p. 29). The State
also gave CUNY $2 million between 1962 and 1963 to fund new Ph.D. programs and $2.8
million to fund capital costs (Board, 1964, June, pp. 29-30). State funding for the operating and
capital costs of CUNY’s community colleges climbed from almost nothing in 1956-57 to $2.5
million in 1963-64 (Board, 1964, June, p. 30). Additional state support for CUNY’s teacher
education programs climbed from $3 million in 1949-50, to $9 million in 1959-60, and then to
$20.9 million in 1963-4 (Board, 1964, June, p. 28).

All this state funding created new pressures for change and expansion at CUNY. In 1963,
Albany instituted tuition at SUNY and Albany lawmakers pointedly changed state law to allow
CUNY to charge tuition as well. Carlino bluntly argued that CUNY should abandon its free
tuition policy in order to fund “expanding facilities and eventually lowering the entrance
requirements so more students could be accepted” (Currivan, 1963, November 27). In 1963,
Bowker arrived from Stanford as CUNY’s new chancellor. The University of California system
already afforded “open access” to its two-year colleges and Bowker began planning a dramatic
expansion of CUNY (CUNY, 2011; Gordon, 1975, pp. 90, 93-95; Edelstein, 1986, p. 1-2). In his
foreword to CUNY’s June, 1964 Master Plan, Bowker laid out his vision: total senior college
enrollment in the existing colleges would increase from 36,000 in September 1963 to between 52,000 and 58,000 in September 1968; two new senior colleges would soon expand access even more (Bowker, 1964, May, p. 2).

Bowker also asserted that CUNY’s new plan would be “color-blind.” He recognized that black and Puerto Rican students were now approaching half of all City public school students—the pool from which CUNY drew 85% of its students. (The other 15% came from the City’s private schools.) Bowker saw “major erosion” within the public schools in poor areas of the city. But he rejected arguments that CUNY should not include these students in its expansion plans; Bowker asserted that nothing “could be more destructive for the City of New York and for the individuals involved” (p. 7). Instead, CUNY “must say to these youngsters that they are expected to succeed and that there will be opportunities for them beyond high school. The places for freshmen must be there” (p. 7).

**Elitist Delusions of Superiority At City College (1964)**

All these increasingly irresistible forces for expanded and fairer access to City College crashed into the immovable object of defensive, intransigent, faculty elitism. Then (as now) college faculty prestige depended to a significant degree on the reflected glory of the high GPAs and SAT scores of entering students. Many City College professors imagined their school as “Harvard on the Hudson,” and their elitism hinged on attracting the highly-valued students deemed as superior, gifted, best, and brightest—and excluding everyone else. But in her 1984 case study of City College in the 1960’s and 1970’s, Constancia Warren argues that City College’s reputation as an elite institution was largely a myth. She notes that through most of its existence, City College had not been highly selective. Moreover, City’s self-image was built upon its increasingly high entrance standards and a list of prestigious alumni of its college of arts.
and liberal sciences—while by far most of its students were always in City College’s less selective and prestigious business school, technology school, education school and school of general studies (pp. 29-33). As a public college situated in Harlem, conflicted and semi-conscious racism was necessarily entangled with this academic myopia: only by believing that virtually none of the black and Puerto Rican high school students in Manhattan were among the superior, gifted, best and brightest, could City College rationalize systemically excluding them.

By 1964, City College also faced new competition. CUNY always drew its applicants from an essentially fixed pool of New York City residents. Bowker’s system-wide expansion plans for CUNY necessarily increased competition for the finite pool of highly-valued, highest-scoring applicants. SUNY was also expanding and New York City students could follow the national trend and go away to college by paying only modest tuition of $400 per semester (Warren, 1984, p. 40). Even if hubris allowed the faculty of “Harvard on the Hudson” to discount competition from other SUNY and CUNY colleges, exclusive private colleges began recruiting their coveted students as well: anti-Semitism at private universities no longer conferred City College with a competitive advantage (Olkin & Bowker, 1987, p. 481; Warren, 1984, p. 40). Moreover, many of the coveted students’ families were fleeing the City completely. In addition to all these competitive pressures, any proposed expansions of incoming first year student classes would directly require City College to “lower” its standards by admitting more diverse—and less valued—students.

Indeed, even as national college attendance exploded during the 1950s, the City’s four-year public colleges had successfully guarded their elitism by actually shrinking their incoming classes. In 1952, they admitted a total of 8,857 baccalaureate students, representing 17% of City high school graduates. But in 1960, they admitted only 8,563 baccalaureate students,
representing only 13% of City high school graduates (Lavin, Alba, Silverstein & Neumann, 1981, p. 4). As CUNY sociologist David Lavin and colleagues noted in 1981, “admission to the municipal college system was becoming ever more difficult as demand was growing, and serious questions were being raised about the appropriateness of such a policy in a publicly supported university” (p. 4).

In another attack on elitism within CUNY’s four-year colleges, significant numbers of transfer students began to arrive from CUNY’s new community colleges. The first president of Staten Island Community College had been a City College dean; he modeled his transfer curriculum directly on the curriculum at City, “even in the specific numbering of the courses” (Gordon, 1975, p. 79). Queensborough Community College “followed a similar pattern, emphasizing transfer-oriented liberal education…” (Gordon, 1975, pp. 79-80). And Bowker was expanding the community colleges. In 1960, the City’s community colleges enrolled about 3,000 students (Gordon, 1975, p. 81). In 1963, CUNY’s community colleges rejected 5,000 out of 7,000 applicants (Bowker, 1964, p. 9). But in 1964, the City’s Board of Higher Education established the Borough of Manhattan Community College and Kingsborough Community College; CUNY also took over the New York City Community College from SUNY (Gordon, 1975, pp. 88-90). CUNY projected community college enrollment to climb to 7,265 and to surge to 24,000 students by 1972 (Board, 1964, June, p. 73). Even worse for the elitists, Bowker argued that even his 1964 expansion plans would not be enough to serve the City’s high school graduates and he hoped he could soon revise them upward (1964, May, p. 6).

**Bowker Promotes Three Integration Plans (February, 1964)**

In a February 7, 1964 memorandum from the Office of the Chancellor—developed in part by Kenneth Clark—Bowker also called for three new forms of CUNY desegregation
programs (CUNY, 1964, February 7, pp. 1-2; Board, 1966, June, p. 23). This “three-pronged experiment” would be excused from CUNY’s general obligation to admit only students with the highest grades and test scores. Its goal would be “to find out enough about the methods of selection and education of culturally disadvantaged persons of high native ability (‘potential’) to enable us to formulate policies which will place the admission to college of such students upon a firm non-discriminatory basis” (CUNY, 1964, February 7, p. 2). (In essence, Bowker recognized that CUNY’s existing admissions were indeed discriminatory.) Bowker added that CUNY hoped “also to learn a great deal about the teaching of students in general” (p. 2).

The first prong of Bowker’s February 1964 proposal was to create a new, special four-year college, which would admit its first class from high school graduates, but then develop a special feeder program—drawing students out of the regular high schools for special instruction (pp. 3-4). This special college did not materialize, but the high-school intervention program began in September of 1965 with 581 tenth graders who were enrolled in five “schools within schools,” across all five boroughs (Board, 1964, June, p. 50; 1966, June, p. 28).

The second prong of Bowker’s desegregation plan built on a demonstration project that had been running at Bronx Community College since 1960 (CUNY, 1964, February 7, pp. 4-6). Local high school seniors with grades “in the middle” and recommendations from high school principals and teachers would be provisionally admitted to community colleges based on their motivation to pursue certain careers. They would be interviewed by college faculty but would take no admissions tests. These “special” matriculants would pay no tuition. They would take placement tests to determine their programs of study, which could include remedial work or a “limited program.” The premise was that strong guidance and a “speeded-down” curriculum
could “promote academic progress” for these students “in the middle” (pp. 5-6). Bowker called for a 200-student program to begin in 1964 (p. 5).

In June of 1964, CUNY’s new “College Discovery” program (designed and administered by Kenneth Clark and CUNY’s Division of Teacher Education) did provisionally admit 230 students into Bronx and Queensborough community colleges (Board, 1964, June, p. 48). But the early results were not encouraging. The one-year retention rate was 64% (148/230). Worse, the average GPA of the surviving 148 students was only 1.75—below the acceptable C average required for transfer to senior colleges. Only 24% (36/148) of the remaining students had an acceptable average of C or higher. At the two-year mark, only 11% of the original group (25/230) were expected to transfer to senior colleges (Board, 1966, June, p. 25).

The third prong of Bowker’s proposed experiment called on senior colleges to host a “College Potentiality Search” from within their Schools of General Studies, using an elaborate, multi-tiered, application process: Students would be nominated by high schools. An advisory board of college and Board of Education representatives would recommend candidates based on “[p]ersonal, social, and economic data,” as well coursework, GPAs and SAT scores. The college’s director of admissions would make final selections (CUNY, 1964, February 7, p. 6). Successful applicants would be provisionally enrolled in the school of general studies as “Pre-Matriculants.” The program would teach on a “highly individualized and closely supervised basis” (p. 7). Students would be assigned to zero-credit remedial courses or a mix of remedial and credit bearing courses “until [they] clearly demonstrate a capacity to pursue college-level work” (p.7). Group and individual tutorials would “discover weaknesses and gaps in their educational backgrounds” and raise student performance “to an acceptable collegiate level.” Students would not be treated “as a group” but “as persons, to be judged on their individual
records” (p.7). Although retention policies would not be altered in “mistaken generosity” to help any student who “shows himself incapable of completing college level work satisfactorily,” the goal was “for these students to be integrated into the courses and life of the College….by hard work (both on the part of the student and teacher) to a level where they will not suffer new agonies of falling “below par” (p. 7). Students would receive special “counseling and supportive services,” including faculty counseling, “psychological counseling [and] social work” (p. 7).

Bowker cited Brooklyn College as a likely host, given that it had already experimented with limited flexible admissions programs and remedial courses; Brooklyn had already developed a “Basic Skills Center” and a “basic skills program” that included “diagnostic evaluation, group lectures, personal instruction [and] conferences, and… special counseling and individualized help….’’ Bowker proposed starting a fifty-student program in fall of 1964 (p .6).

Brooklyn’s Academic Talent Search Program (1964-1968)

In the Fall of 1964, (armed with a Rockefeller Foundation grant) Brooklyn College’s School of General Studies launched a 42 student pilot program using Bowker’s model, which it called the “Academic Talent Search Project” or “ATSP.” The ATSP students were recent graduates from Brooklyn academic high schools in poverty areas. They had academic diplomas, but low high school grade point averages (Furcron, 1968, pp. 3, 7). They were provisionally admitted until they could demonstrate academic success. ATSP “was designed to explore whether students with apparent college potential, but without the required academic standards for admission, could succeed in college despite financial and cultural deprivation in terms of middle-class values” (p. 7). No new students were added in later semesters; ATSP instead tracked these 42 students for four years. The plan was to offer “all the social, academic, financial and psychological support that seemed necessary and appropriate” (p. 7).
ATSP students received help from student and faculty tutors (pp. 12-13). Faculty mentors (some college counselors and some regular faculty) counseled them (p. 12). They also received eight-dollar weekly stipends—but most also had to work to support themselves (pp. 12-13, 17). In the first year, the ATSP students were “segregated” into small tutorial groups with specialized instruction. For example, four English instructors taught full-year English courses to sections of ten students. These instructors had full authority to design their own curricula and evaluate student performance. About half (23) of the ATSP students completed these English courses for full credit. Another twelve received one semester’s credit (p. 10). In the second year, all tutorials were eliminated (p. 11).

After two years, ATSP retention was good, with 27 of 42 (64%) returning for a fifth semester. But the ATSP students’ GPAs were low, averaging only 1.8 (about a C-) in their first year (when they studied in the small segregated tutorial groups) and 1.2 (just over a D) in their second year as they entered mainstream classes. After two years, only one ATSP student had been fully matriculated as a regular student (pp. 14, 18). Eleven more students dropped out in the next two years, leaving only 16 of 42 (38%) in college after eight semesters. By 1968, only four had been fully matriculated. Others persisted, but with low grade point averages. By fall of 1968, only one ATSP student had graduated and counselors believed that six more would likely eventually graduate, a potential success rate of 7 out of 42 (16.6%) (pp. 21-22). In June of 1966, ATSP was not mentioned in CUNY’s revised Master Plan (Board, 1966, June, p. 29). By 1968, ATSP’s closing report was forced to state “unequivocally that many people at the College believe the Project to have been a failure” (Furcron, 1968, p. 27).
City College Faculty Resist Expanded Access (1964-1965)

Meanwhile, Gallagher prodded City College toward broader and fairer access. In March of 1964, he accepted SUNY President James E. Allen’s invitation to join a new committee to promote college integration “at the earliest possible moment” (Allen, 1964, March 11; Gallagher, 1964, March 16). Gallagher openly and actively encouraged City College’s faculty to take action to integrate the college (Ballard, 2011, p. 217). He asked Clark to formulate a desegregation plan for City College, but Clark declined, saying he had no time. In February of 1964, Gallagher warned City College faculty that City was expected to increase its Fall 1965 incoming class by 250-275 students (with another 100-125 increase for Baruch, which was then still City’s “downtown campus.”) (CCNY, 1964, Feb 21, p. 6). While it could, the faculty resisted this expansion. In the Fall of 1963, City College admitted 1,995 first-year students to its main campus. In 1964, City admitted only 1,957 students—a slight decrease from the previous year (Enrollment Comparisons, 1964, December 10). In April of 1964, Gallagher also estimated 366 transfer students would arrive in September (CCNY, 1964, April 23, p. 2).

Under pressure to expand access and desegregate the student body, some faculty members sought to decouple those issues by supporting a small desegregation program. City College history professor (and enrollment committee member) Bernard Bellush argued against expanded admissions in a hearing on CUNY’s proposed Master Plan (CCNY, 1964, April 23, p. 3). Bellush recognized that the senior colleges were already in decline because “the elite of our

8 (Ballard, 2011, p 217). Clark was busy. He was involved with the Project Discovery Program at the community colleges. He had also became embroiled in a public political dispute with Adam Clayton Powell, leading Clark to resign from HARYOU after it received up to $118 million dollars in government grants (Apple, 1964, July 30). Instead, Clark drew from HARYOU’s massive 1964 Harlem study to write his 1965 book Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power. He also continued his work at Northside, and he formed a new civil rights organization, “MARC” (Markowitz & Rosner, 1996, p. 199; Myrdal 1965 xi.)
high school population is attracted with scholarship aid to other schools; we have been getting those who fall within the 83 to 90 percent composite scores; and as the flow of Community College transferees continues, this score likewise declines” (Bellush, 1964, April 6, p. 2). Having admitted that the City College was already failing to compete for the most coveted, highest ranked students, Bellush nonetheless defended faculty elitism: “Why must we be placed on the defensive for educating the best minds of this city? What is the crime in finding and encouraging excellence?” (p. 2).

Hoping to focus his time on teaching “the gifted group of students” (p. 4), Bellush maintained that the “so-called” democratization of education “can only destroy the historic role of our Senior Colleges” (p. 5). Instead, Bellush called for a three-tiered, stratified system like those “successfully developed in California, Minnesota, Michigan and other states” (p. 5).

Bellush also argued that expanding access and lowering admissions standards in general would not draw students “from underprivileged communities” into the senior colleges. Instead, he proposed a limited desegregation program for “pre-matriculated’ students within the schools of general studies (pp. 6-7).

Faced with other, larger threats to its elitism, faculty support for a limited desegregation program strengthened. In an April 23, 1964 report to the Faculty Council, the Enrollment Policy committee (which included both Bellush and John Davis) proposed admitting a group of “pre-matriculated students to be selected from underprivileged areas” who demonstrated high motivation. These specially admitted students would receive personal counseling, diagnostic testing to assist with course placement and tutorial services “in mathematics, foreign languages, and English” (p. 2). This proposal was adopted by the faculty council and submitted to Bowker for approval. But on June 15, 1964, the Enrollment Committee reported that Bowker had rejected
their plan. (The report does not say why Bowker rejected it.) They urged City College to “continue to press for” such a program and suggested forming a faculty committee to determine a course of study for “pre-matriculant students” and recommend the budget, faculty, and staffing needs for the program (CCNY, 1964, June 15). With this setback, another year would be lost before City College began to desegregate itself.

At the same time, City College faculty continued their attacks on transfer students. In its April 23, 1964 report, the enrollment policy committee asserted that allowing students to transfer into City College with a “C” average only led to “intellectual humiliation” of those students; they were “unprepared” because C grades were “too readily given at the Community Colleges” (p. 1). Instead, the Committee proposed that City College’s day division accept only transfer students with a B averages or higher. Transfer students with lower GPAs would be forced into the evening division until they produced “evidence of ability to maintain Day Session standards” (p. 2). In response to this proposal, Gallagher noted that it would “unilaterally… abrogate the existing agreements” regarding transfer students. Gallagher also observed that this plan would exclude virtually all transfer students from the mainstream of the college, as he expected about 366 transfers in the Fall of 1966, “of whom only 16 would have a ‘B’ average” (CCNY, 1964, April 23, p. 4).

In February of 1965, the enrollment policy committee urged that all transfers students from community colleges be required to present an associates degree, and that all transfers (except those from other CUNY senior colleges) “be required to take achievement tests” in English, history, and “in their field of concentration…” (CCNY, 1965, February 15, p. 2). In March, the enrollment policy committee joined other faculty calls to amend transfer requirements to require a 2.5 minimum GPA for all transferees (CCNY, 1965, March 8, pp. 1-2).
In a 1964-1965 annual report to the faculty council, the committee on course and standing recommended that all transfer students with GPAs from 2.0 to 2.5 be placed on immediate scholastic warning as soon as they entered the college and be dismissed at once if their grades in any one semester fell below 2.0 (CCNY, 1965, p. 2).

**Harlem’s Anger Explodes (July 1964)**

In the morning of July 16, 1964, James Powell, a fifteen-year-old, black middle school student, was shot twice and killed by an off-duty police lieutenant outside Manhattan’s Robert Wagner Junior High School where the boy was attending summer classes (Jones, 1964, July 17). On July 19th, residents rallied in Harlem on 125th Street and outside the 123rd Street police precinct to protest this killing. After police violently attacked the protesters, Harlem’s anger exploded into nine days of riots by thousands. 9 Kenneth Clark offered white New Yorkers little comfort, telling *The New York Times* that blacks were “fed up” with “unprovoked shooting and killing by police” and he doubted whether any black leader could “ask his race to be moderate any longer” (Clark, 1964, July 22). In a lengthy 1965 essay, Clark wondered why “there have been so few riots.” He observed that, despite gains in national civil rights laws, Northern blacks had seen little change in their lives. Instead, racism left each man: “rejected, segregated, discriminated against, in employment, in housing, his children subjugated in *de facto* segregated and inferior schools in spite of a plethora of laws that imply the contrary” (Clark, 1965, September 5).

9 (Montgomery and Clines 1964, July 19; Tragedy, 1964, July 20; After, 1964, August 2). These were not the first police shootings to triggered protests in the Harlem streets below City College. On August 1, 1943, after a policeman shot a black soldier on 126th Street, Harlem riots followed causing five deaths. In July of 1959, ten days after police shot and killed a youth in West Harlem, a second, accidental police shooting almost caused another Harlem riot (Kihss, 1959, July 16; 1964, July 20.)
In the Fall of 1964, Gallagher formed a City College faculty task force to offer a plan. But by April of 1965 it had met only once and had taken no action (CCNY, 1965a, April 8, p.2). Meanwhile, on February 21, 1965, Malcolm X was assassinated by black gunmen at the Audubon Ballroom at 165th Street and Broadway, only twenty-five blocks north of City College. On March 8, 1965, the nation watched state troopers and volunteer police officers tear-gas and brutally attack peaceful civil rights marchers in Selma, Alabama—as white crowds cheered. Ten days later, a City College student newspaper article, “College Image: Color it White” outlined the growing community pressures on Gallagher as CORE, the Amsterdam News, Harlem parents, Harlem students, and Kenneth Clark all attacked City’s continued racial exclusion. Clark charged Gallagher’s administration with a policy of “indifference, detachment and isolation.” An Amsterdam News editorial charged City as being “almost as lily white during the day as the University of Mississippi” and challenged Gallagher to act or lose his reputation as a reformer: “We don’t care how you do it. Get some Negroes in City College” (Blintz, 1965, March 18, pp. 1-2, quoting Clark and James Hintz).

In March of 1965, Davis had run out of patience. He wrote to the Faculty Senate that two years had “passed since various units of City College have been considering ways of increasing the presence of Negro and Puerto Rican students in this college…” (p. 1). Yet, Davis complained, “the college has been able to do nothing” while other colleges acted. Instead, “each unit… has reported on how some one else can best solve the problem” (p. 1). Like Bellush, Davis recognized that the highest scoring students were bypassing City College, probably due to “the competition of private schools in New England and upstate New York public and private schools utilizing New York scholarships.” But instead of becoming more inclusive, City College
was maintaining high GPA/SAT entrance requirements and refusing to reach its CUNY admissions targets (p. 2). Now, Davis proposed: 1) a desegregation program to immediately admit fifty students based on teacher recommendations as well as GPA/SAT scores, 2) beginning summer programs for “culturally deprived” high school juniors and seniors and then admitting them to City College with the help of “guidance and tutorial centers,” and 3) helping to improve the public schools through City’s School of Education (pp. 2-3).

In advance of an April 8, 1965 faculty council meeting, Gallagher pressed for action, calling for new proposals for an integration program that would start in the Fall (Abelson, 1965, April 7). In addition to Davis’s ideas, Bernard Levy and the School of Education made new proposals (Abelson, 1965 April 5). Levy was a Spanish professor and textbook author who began to teach at City College in 1925. In 1944, he was appointed to lead City’s adult education program, which then conducted neighborhood classes for 10,000 New Yorkers each year. In 1948, Levy also became the director of the School of General Studies (Appointed, 1948, August 2). By 1965, Levy had been on City’s faculty for forty years. Levy’s adult education, associate degree, and non-matriculant programs all comprised a much more diverse, less elitist, and often invisible side of City College. But as the new CUNY community colleges took over these functions, the senior colleges were eliminating them. Associate degree programs were phased out at all senior colleges beginning in 1965 and enrollments began to decline (Carfora, 1967, June 29). The City College adult education program had provided adult learning classes to more than 150,000 New Yorkers. But it began running a deficit in 1960 as the new community colleges expanded and Gallagher closed it in 1964 (Zweifach 1963, July 9; Gallagher, 1963, July 11; Lissim 1964, June 10; Gallagher, 1964, June 11). Levy had room for a new program.
Davis requested that his written March complaints be circulated with the call of the April 8th meeting (CCNY, 1965b, April 8, p. 2). In an enrollment committee report also dated April 8th, the committee continued its battle against transfer students and expanded admissions; it worried that City College was losing “the brighter students” who were moving away from Manhattan and choosing other colleges “with higher standards” (CCNY, 1965a, April 8, p. 3). But the committee also supported Davis, stating its “accord with his feeling of urgency about the problem and his impatience with present procedures which made the City College an unattainable goal for many potentially able students” (p. 2). As City College delayed, the committee observed, our “neighbors in Harlem are waiting for word that we mean to do something about getting more of their sons and daughters into college” (p. 2).

During the April 8, 1965 faculty council meeting, Gallagher asked for authority to appoint a new committee to plan and initiate a Fall 1965 desegregation program, housed within the School of General Studies, and therefore led by Levy. In a rare break from “disadvantaged youth,” “disadvantaged individuals,” “educational opportunity” and similar euphemistic phrases, the enrollment committee chair stated bluntly that they were “in accord with Professor Davis’ feeling of urgency concerning the problem of increasing the number of Negro and Puerto Rican students at the College” (CCNY, 1965a, April 8, p. 2).

Seizing the initiative, Gallagher outlined the proposed desegregation program. Promising applicants would be recruited based on their academic records. All students would be called “prematriculants,” an optimistic spin on their status as provisional, non-matriculated students until they proved themselves by successfully completing a number of college courses. Instruction would be individualized, with each student receiving credit for college work completed. The new City College program would seek job placements for graduates. The program would be evaluated
“from time to time.” As an experimental program, it would need special funding over five years. The size of the new program’s first class was set between “50 and 100” students (p. 2).

Levy urged the faculty to remain focused on the need to admit a group of “disadvantaged students” by the fall, and he noted that reduced numbers of associate degree students opened up 300 unfilled part-time spaces. Levy agreed that Gallagher’s proposed steps were reasonable and promised that “the results will be fruitful for at least some of the students involved” (p. 3). The faculty unanimously approved a joint committee to launch the program and gave Gallagher authority to appoint the members (CCNY, 1965b, April 8, p. 3). The new program was very similar to the model Bowker proposed in February of 1964 and Brooklyn had used in its small 1964 ATSP program. As such, faculty elitists could imagine that only a small trickle of black and Latino students would eventually reach the mainstream courses in the college’s day division.

On April 9, 1964, Gallagher appointed two committees, one made up of education faculty and one of liberal arts faculty. He charged the joint committees with “planning and projecting a special program for not to exceed 100 pre-matriculants in September 1965” and gave them “full power to act” (Gallagher, 1965, April 9). On April 15, 1965, Gallagher attended the committees’ first meeting. They combined themselves into one joint committee and elected Levy as chair. The joint committee outlined ideas for its “prebaccalaureates” program. It would be a demonstration project with a “new approach” that was distinguishable from the existing CUNY “College Discovery” desegregation programs. Applicants would live in Northern Manhattan, have limited family income, and have GPAs in the upper half of their high school classes. The committee would begin by preparing application and publicity materials. Curriculum concerns would be deferred (Bass, 1965, April 15). Perhaps as another nudge, Gallagher soon recommended a student to Levy for the new program (Gallagher, 1965, April 28).
On May 27, 1965, the joint committee met to hear reports for the recruiting procedures for what was now euphemistically titled the “Pre-Baccalaureate Program For The Disadvantaged.” Students with all levels of grades were eligible if they showed “relative strength in one or more academic subjects.” Several community agencies would recruit applicants. A press release announced: “City College plans to offer on an experimental basis a college Pre-Baccalaureate Program for 100 disadvantaged persons, beginning in the summer of 1965. Full provision will be made for personal counseling. Instruction will be individualized in order to enable students to progress at a rate best suited to their particular abilities. Remedial courses will be provided as well.” Students received free tuition and financial assistance, but applicants’ family income had to indicate “economic deprivation.” Eventually, the successful students would be fully matriculated; others would be guided to “more appropriate” programs or goals (Bass & Levy, 1965, May 27).

City College’s new desegregation and supportive teaching program, (soon to be renamed SEEK) now finally began to accept applications. Having endured a century of de facto exclusion, a small group of black and Latino Manhattan students would finally have a real opportunity to enter City College.
Chapter Four

Ballard and Berger: Launching and Leading SEEK (1965-1967)

When his mind drifts back to his segregated Philadelphia elementary school 75 years ago, Allen Ballard is still haunted by the young black lives that were wasted. Ballard went to Joseph E. Hill, a grade school for black children that was twenty minutes from his house—while a brand-new, grade school for white children was only two minutes away (Ballard, 2011, p. 23). Ballard saw the promising futures of many of his impoverished classmates destroyed when they died from untreated tuberculosis (Ballard, 2014, p. 2). In the early twentieth century, Philadelphia suffered high rates of TB infection and black residents were as much as three times more likely to die from it as native whites (Carthon, 2011). The primary treatment was rest and isolation. As such, poor, overworked black families, trapped in “tenement housing [with] dense overcrowding, and poor sanitation” were at especially high risk (Carthon, 2011, p.2). Yet, no one treated or isolated Ballard’s dying classmates: “we lost a lot of them to tuberculosis….they just plain died. One kid came to school coughing blood one day. I remember Billy was his name; he was coughing blood, and they let him keep coming” (Ballard, 2014, p. 2).

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On the morning of May 7, 1945, it was quiet in the Ebensee concentration camp. Almost a year earlier, on May 28, 1944, eighteen-year-old Leslie Berger and fourteen members of his family had been rounded up by the Nazis and loaded onto cattle cars and transported to the death camps. Over the year, almost all of Berger’s family had been murdered (Berger, n.d., pp. 4:1-4:11). After a brutal year of suffering at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Mauthausen, Melk and Ebensee, Berger did not expect to live much longer himself; but he no longer cared: “I had lost interest in everything and had given up my fantasies about ever being free again. My attention span was
limited to the immediate moment. I reached a point where nothing really mattered. My single concern was the constant pain of hunger and it consumed all of my energies” (pp. 6:1, 6:2, 7:1).

Now, Berger began to hear the buzzing of inmates’ voices: “The guards are gone” (pp. 6:1, 7:1).

* * * * *

By 1961, Ballard was a newly minted Harvard Ph.D. who badly needed a teaching job (Ballard, 2011, p. 211). In middle-school, he had escaped the racial abuse and discriminatory grades from his white teacher only when he passed an exam that allowed him to transfer to a magnet school (Ballard, 2011, pp. 3-4, 65). As an undergraduate, Ballard had struggled with the isolation, pressures and frustrations of being one of the first two African-American undergraduates at Ohio’s Kenyon College (Ballard, 1973, p. 5, 2011, p. 107-118). One “liberal” economics professor had even accused Ballard of cheating solely because he refused to believe a black student could write a perfect test paper (Ballard, 2011, p. 114). Now, the proud, six-foot-two, 31-year-old hoped to teach at a black college; but Howard, Hampton and Fiske ignored his applications. Ballard was offered an interview at the University of Virginia; but they rescinded the invitation as soon as he called to inform them he was black (pp. 211-12). Then City College invited Ballard to interview with a faculty group that included John Davis; soon after the interview, City offered him a faculty position in its political science department and Ballard accepted (p. 212).

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After the war, Berger briefly attended medical school in Hungary but dropped out when he realized his professors were fascist anti-Semites (Berger, n.d., p. 8:5). Then he smuggled himself across Europe, living for over a year in “Displaced Persons” refugee camps in Austria and Bavaria (pp. 8:10-19). After negotiating an immigration visa from uncaring American
bureaucrats, Berger reached New York City on December 12, 1947 (p. 9:1). He got work in a handbag factory, and despite his very limited English, began taking night classes at Brooklyn College. There, Berger’s first-year writing teacher offered friendship and “tremendous encouragement.” This teacher gave Berger an “A” that excused him from a second semester writing requirement—and so no one else learned how little English Berger knew (p. 9:15). He graduated Brooklyn College magna cum laude and phi beta kappa in 1954 (p. 9:15). He then earned his Ph.D. in psychology at the University of Michigan in only three years, graduating in 1957. Berger worked as a staff psychologist at hospitals in Pittsburgh and New York. He taught psychology as a part-time, Brooklyn College lecturer. Like Ballard, in the fall of 1961, Berger looked for a full-time teaching job. He accepted a job as an assistant professor and assistant administrator to Bernard Levy in City College’s School of General Studies (Berger, 1976; Levy, 1964, February 25).

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**Ballard Plans A Desegregation Program For City College (1964)**

By February of 1964, the wasted lives of Ballard’s promising childhood classmates were weighing heavily on him. He was happy at City College. He had found a walk-up studio apartment at 103rd Street and Broadway. With Davis as his mentor, Ballard had immersed himself for three years in teaching classes and publishing enough articles to earn tenure (Ballard, 2011, pp. 211-12, 215). Ballard knew many volunteers were traveling to the south and risking their safety to fight for civil rights. But he believed his fuse was too short for non-violent resistance. (For example, an angry Ballard broke up with his City College girlfriend the moment he learned that her rich white parents disapproved—without first discussing it with her (Ballard, 2011, pp. 214-16).) So, when 460,000 New York City school students (including Francee
Covington) stayed home on February 3, 1964 to protest “New York’s segregated public education system,” Ballard volunteered as a tutor at one of the “Freedom Schools” set up that day (Ballard, 2011, p. 216; Ravitch, 1974, p. 276).

In the spring of 1964, Berger could see that City College was excluding many promising black and Puerto Rican students by falsely labeling them as inferior. Driven to succeed and deeply sensitive to injustice, Berger could be thin-skinned and defensive. As a victim of systemic oppression and as a clinical psychologist, he understood that “neutral” systems were often biased, racist and cruel. Berger and Levy began to plan a new program to admit and support black and Puerto Rican students—and to directly challenge false assumptions of superiority grounded in the fallacy that high school GPAs and SAT scores could fairly predict college success (Berger, 1969-70, p. 2). Levy also wrote to Gallagher asking to promote Berger to assistant director of City College’s School of General Studies—a job Levy said Berger had already been performing for three years without recognition. According to Levy, Berger was now supervising the SGS orientation program, coordinating all incoming non-matriculant student entrance and placement exams, serving on various committees, and coordinating “the admissions procedures, [counseling] facilities and course programs for students in the Foreign Student Program” (Levy, 1964, February 25).

In the spring of 1964, Ballard grew more troubled. There had been only about five black students among the thousand he taught in his four years at City College. A decade after Brown, City College was still a “white citadel” above Harlem, whose black and brown citizens’ taxes paid for “the education of white students and the salaries of white faculty and administrators.” Ballard knew that “the culprit was the admissions standard” that excluded almost all black students (Ballard, 2011, p. 214). He had to do something to change those standards, even though
he knew it “meant a confrontation with the alumni and white faculty of the college” (p. 214). Ballard consulted Davis who urged him to speak directly to Gallagher. Gallagher supported Ballard’s idea; he urged Ballard to write up a desegregation program plan and Ballard did so (Ballard, 2011, p. 217; 2014, pp. 2-3).

**Ballard, Berger and Sohmer Launch SEEK (1965)**

Ballard and Berger remained in the background during the crucial April 8, 1965 Faculty Council meeting where Gallagher, Davis and Levy obtained faculty approval to begin a desegregation program that was based on Ballard and Berger’s ideas. Ballard remembers that the faculty was hesitant, with many questions about maintaining City’s academic standards. And he laughs now that the deans (perhaps worried about Ballard’s temper) asked him “to keep quiet” (Ballard, 2014, p. 3). The next day, Gallagher named Levy as chair of two new faculty committees formed to launch the program (Gallagher, 1965, April 9). Within a week, the committees merged into a joint “Special Committee” and elected Levy as their chair (Bass, 1965, April 15). Levy quickly delegated responsibility to an informal working committee of Berger, Ballard and mathematician Bernard Sohmer (Ballard, 2014, pp. 3-6).

In June, Gallagher advised Levy that CUNY’s administrative council had approved the new program (Gallagher, 1965, June 23). The pilot year was funded by a $125,000 federal anti-poverty grant (Berger, 1969, July 18; Levy & Berger, 1965, November, p. 18). A two page summary of “The City College Pre-Baccalaureate Program for the Disadvantaged” specified that applicants would be accepted who had an overall 75% high school GPA or a 70% GPA in regents courses, or an 80% average in at least one subject, or an SAT score of at least 950. An

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10 (Levy & Berger, 1965, June). In its first year, SEEK was known as the “Pre-Baccalaureate” program. Berger rechristened the program as SEEK a year later, although many at City continued to informally use the old name (Ballard, 2014). Here, I generally use SEEK throughout.
attached budget showed the allocation of SEEK’s $125,000 grant to pay for seven teachers ($60,900), two counselors ($15,000), a clerk ($5,000), a summer program ($10,000), research and evaluation ($10,000), and miscellaneous ($4,100) (Levy & Berger, 1965, June).

Ballard credits Sohmer as an equal partner in SEEK’s pilot year (Ballard, 2014, p. 4). Sohmer remained SEEK’s Mathematics department coordinator until 1968 or 1969 (Kopperman, 2016, April 8; Ballard 1968, August 22, organizational chart). Ballard also credits mathematician Abraham Schwartz (who became the dean of the School of General Studies in 1966) as a fourth member of their team (Ballard, 2014, p. 4). Under Schwartz’s leadership, the 1960s City College Mathematics department was egalitarian, team-oriented, and focused on its teaching mission (Warren, 1984, pp. 46-47). Ralph Kopperman joined the City College Mathematics department in 1967; a year or two later, he took over from Sohmer as its SEEK coordinator. Kopperman recalls that no one in his department was strongly opposed to SEEK. “Maybe as mathematicians we didn’t get into campus politics. We saw SEEK as a problem to be overcome” (2016, April 8). Kopperman adds that his “view of SEEK and Open Admissions, was and still is, that by denying some people the opportunity to get a higher education for irrelevant reasons, such as race or recent immigration, we deny them the opportunity to earn the life they deserve, and at the same time, we deny society the advances they could have helped bring to it” (2016, April 8).

Bowker, Gallagher, Clark, Davis, Levy, Sohmer, Schwartz and many others at CUNY promoted, defended, shaped and supported SEEK in its first years. Many New York politicians also provided critical support beginning in 1966 (CUNY 2007; 2012). SEEK teachers and counselors also made critical contributions. But Ballard and Berger quickly emerged as SEEK’s

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11 As another possible indication of Gallagher’s support, between 1965 and 1967, Ballard, Sohmer and Berger were all named as City College deans—making Ballard the first black dean in the at City University system (Ballard 2011, p. 217; 2014, pp. 3-4).
principal shapers, voices, leaders and theorists: Berger was its first City College administrator; Ballard was its second. Both men would soon be promoted to be University Deans responsible for shaping supportive learning systems across CUNY’s four-year colleges. Together, Berger and Ballard built and theorized SEEK to remediate the physical, emotional, psychological and educational wounds inflicted on SEEK students by racism, poverty and injustice, while avoiding doing them any additional harm.

In this mission, Ballard and Berger, each carrying his own deep scars, complemented each other even where they differed. Both men advanced the insights of Clark’s work and the Supreme Court’s Brown decision, but with different emphases. Ballard’s painful school and college experiences left him with a complex and deeply personal understanding of the challenges of integrating black students into white systems. Ballard would also see SEEK as an opportunity to desegregate the college (and then the university) by hiring black teachers, counselors and administrators. As a Holocaust survivor, refugee, immigrant, and ESL student, Berger was even more critical of elitist systems than Ballard; Berger would soon directly and deeply challenge the validity of both admissions criteria and teaching practices. Berger had come to believe in full integration as the only path to fight false assumptions of inferiority and superiority. Ballard focused on building a program that addressed the unique needs and concerns of black students and the black struggle. Berger focused on building a psychologically aware program that assessed, guided and supported the individual potential of every student.

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12 I do not see in the fragmentary 1965-66 SEEK records when Berger assumed the formal title of director. Levy remained the program’s administrator in some ways until June of 1966 (Gallagher, 1966, June 6; Steven, 1966, June 14). In August, Gallagher called Berger the Director (Gallagher, 1966, August 3). But Berger negotiated with Bowker about SEEK’s 1966 expansion starting on July 14, 1966 (Berger, 1966, July 27). And Volpe and Ballard both describe Berger as SEEK’s director from the start (Volpe, 1972 p. 765; Ballard, 2011 p. 219; Ballard, 2014 p. 3).
Selecting the First Class of SEEK Students (1965)

In the summer of 1965, Ballard, Berger and Sohmer began to select their first class of students (Ballard, 2014, pp. 4-5). The only fixed requirements were residency between 86th and 155th Streets in Manhattan (roughly the areas of Harlem, Spanish Harlem, Hamilton Grange, Sugar Hill and Morningside Heights), demonstration of financial need, and some success in high school grades (Bass, 1965, April 15). The financial needs requirement was a condition of their federal funding grant under the anti-poverty act. On June 14, 1965, Levy reported a large “reservoir” of applicants, from which he expected to find one hundred “qualified students” (CCNY, 1965, June 14, p. 3). But the several hundred applications received through CUNY’s admission processing centers produced only a few dozen acceptable candidates. “The rest could not qualify by any standards we contemplated” (Levy & Berger, 1965, November, p. 19).

Instead, Ballard, Berger and Sohmer recruited students through community agencies near City College, as well as through high school counselors (Levy & Berger, 1965, November, p. 19). These efforts produced 500 more applicants, “half or so of which had to be rejected on economic grounds” (Levy & Berger, 1965, November, p. 19).

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13 (Levy & Berger 1965, November, pp. 18-19). 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. Ballard says he did not write them; but based on their style and content, he is “99%” sure Berger did (Ballard, 2015, September 2). The first document is a fragment of a larger report, entitled “Part II. The Prebaccalaureate Program” and paginated 18 to 23 with a one-page appendix. Based on its content, this eight page report was written by a SEEK administrator during the Fall 1965 semester. I attribute it as “Levy & Berger, 1965, November.” The second document is a 16 page history of the founding of SEEK, from 1965 to 1967, written at a time when five SEEK students had graduated and ten more were expected to graduate “in June or August of this year” (9). That dates it between July of 1969 and June of 1970. Berger told Ballard he was working on such a history in 1970-71 (Ballard, 2015, September 2). This version may be a rough draft. Berger confuses some dates and details; but he sets out a unique explanation of the insights and questions that shaped the first few years of SEEK. I attribute it as “Berger, 1969-70”.

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From the remaining pool of about 250 qualifying students, Berger, Ballard and Sohmer interviewed the eligible candidates and selected the first class of 113 students (Ballard, 2014, pp. 4-5). They cared little about SAT scores and accepted low overall grades if they could see some sign of intellectual “sparkle” (Ballard 2014, pp. 4-5; Berger, 1969, July 18 p. 5). In a 1969 speech, Berger remembered that:

When we first started in 1965, we made an attempt to take many things into consideration. We read the evaluations and recommendations of high school teachers and principals, and we looked at the students’ transcripts. For the first year or two, we tried to select students on the basis of high school records. If students had averages in the low 70’s, we looked for some indication of past achievement—some high points, rather than a bland 72 in all subjects (Berger, 1969, July 18, p. 5).

Still, as they sifted through candidates, Ballard and Sohmer (the faculty members in the more elitist College of Liberal Arts and Sciences) were more conservative; Berger (the psychologist and School of General Studies administrator) was much more willing to believe in students and to doubt that either their test scores or GPAs were meaningful measures of their college potential (Ballard, 2014, p. 5). There were no racial requirements for applicants; rather the limited residency requirement more subtly drew in mostly black and Puerto Rican students. It appears that the 1965 program did not even track race: as to the first class of students, they reported only that between “60 to 70%” were black, “20 to 25%” were Puerto Rican, and ten percent were white (“Pre-baccalaureate,” 1965, October 7, p. 1; Levy & Berger, 1965, November, p. 19). All had family incomes that were less than $5,000 a year (Levy, 1966, February 23, p. 1).
Designing and Setting Up a “Mini-College” (1965-1966)

Once the students were selected, Ballard, Berger and Sohmer faced a complex and daunting challenge. They had to design a new, holistically supportive and student-centered program that would prepare and empower these 113 students to successfully integrate themselves into the mainstream college. Their goal was 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, December, p. 3). SEEK offered students financial support, including free tuition, books and stipends. Berger set up regular meetings with psychological counselors as a central part of the new program. Drawing on his background as a clinician, Berger argued that the key was that teachers “and counselors work very closely with each student on a personal and highly individualized basis” (Berger, 1966, December, p. 2). Teachers and counselors would have to reach these students, build their confidence, and awaken their love of learning; as such, creative teaching was essential. Ballard knew that to successfully integrate the SEEK students into this white college, they had to first partially segregate and prepare them (Ballard, 2014, p. 6). To do this, they had to “set up a mini-college” with its own “stretched” versions of mainstream courses (Ballard, 2014, p. 6). Berger, Ballard and Sohmer hired or borrowed teachers and counselors. They reassured skeptical departments and faculty and induced their cooperation and support. Ballard and Berger set up a reading program (Ballard, 2014, p. 6). They offered or mandated tutoring to students who needed to catch up as well as to those “seeking to progress more rapidly.”

14 (Levy & Berger, 1965, November, p. 22). By 1967-68, the SEEK student-tutoring program at City had developed into three components. Students in “basic” science courses attended mandatory weekly workshops. Social science courses offered voluntary weekly workshops in coordination with student counselors. And students could sign up for one or two hours of weekly tutoring in any other subjects (Ballard 1968, August 22, App. III).
All this had be done under intense pressures with friends and foes watching closely. The two 1964 efforts to integrate CUNY had produced disappointing results. If the City College SEEK students did not succeed, critics would seize on the program’s failure as proof that the poor black and Puerto Rican sons and daughters of New York City were uneducable and had no place in its demanding, elite, four-year public colleges.

**Segregation and Integration in the Fall 1965 SEEK Student Schedules**

Consistent with Berger’s premise that teaching should be tailored to best serve specific students, no “attempt was made to devise a precise structure or to formulate more immediate aims for the Program until student recruitment had been virtually completed” (Levy & Berger, 1965, November, p. 20). Then, individual student programs were developed based on placement tests administered by the academic departments and “preferences [students] expressed in personal interviews” (Levy & Berger, 1965, November, p. 20). But student choices were limited. About two-thirds of the Fall 1965 SEEK students (75/113) were full-time. They were assigned 16 to 18 hours of classwork: “English (5 weekly class hours); Mathematics (3 or 4) or Foreign Language (3 or 4); Speech (4); Music (3) or Art (2); Physical Education (2). In addition, each student [attended] weekly guidance conferences, and, as required, a course of instruction in remedial reading” (Levy & Berger, 1965, p. 22). The part-time students carried the same five-hour English classes, with a math or foreign language course, and the same weekly guidance conferences and remedial reading instruction (Levy & Berger, 1965, November, p. 22).

Ballard has described writing instruction as the “heart” of the SEEK program (Ballard 1968, August 22, p. 5; 2014, p. 8). The only course that every Fall 1965 SEEK student took was a five-hour, stretched SEEK version of the required four-hour, first-year writing course, English One. SEEK ran four stretched daytime sections of English One which met three days a week for
85 minutes and two night SEEK sections which met twice a week for 150 minutes. The 75 full
time SEEK students also took a SEEK version of Speech One, which ran in three sections. There
were also two SEEK sections each of French 41 and Spanish 41 and two SEEK sections of Math
42-43. Lecturers taught all these SEEK sections except that associate professor Howard
Bergmann taught one SEEK section of Math 42-43 and assistant professor Irving Branman
taught one SEEK section of Speech One (Pre-Baccalaureate, 1965, October 7; Levy & Berger,
1965, November, pp. 21-22).

In total, the Fall 1965 SEEK students received 266 total placements into special SEEK
courses: English One (113), Speech One (75), Elementary French (24), Elementary Spanish (29),
and Math Review (25). In total, the SEEK students received 176 placements into mainstream
courses: Physical Education (70 students in 20 sections), Art One (41 students in 19 sections),
Music One (33 students in 11 sections) French and Spanish (25 students in various courses) and
Mathematics (7 students in four different courses). In addition, all students attended “weekly
guidance conferences, and, as required a course of instruction in remedial reading” (“Pre-
baccalaureate,” 1965, October 7, pp. 1-2; Pre-Baccalaureate, 1965, October 7; Levy & Berger,
1965, pp. 21-22). In this way, SEEK students were partly segregated into their own special
versions of college-level courses and at once also partly integrated into the mainstream of the
college.

Partially mainstreaming the students also helped to avoid stigmatizing them as separate or
less capable. Officially, “the students in this program are not identified to their fellow students as
being in a distinct or separate group” (Board, 1966, June, p. 29). But in practice, SEEK students
were often labeled and stigmatized by other students or teachers. Marvina White recalls: “I think
because there were so few black students when I went there,… the whole question, actually,
became for many people, are you SEEK or are you regular?…. there were ways in which our little program seemed to come with a big, loud announcement and I don’t quite know how that happened” (White, 2015, January 27, p. 9).

**Stretched “Basic” Courses in SEEK**

To Ballard, the overall goal was to segregate and prepare SEEK students and then gradually merge them “into the general academic population after they had been prepared at a certain level to enter those regular classrooms” (2014, p. 6). But Berger believed it was important to include special compensatory courses and mainstream courses in student schedules from the start so that a new student “has some picture of where he is going, and what tools he will need” (Berger, 1969-70, p. 4). Attending both SEEK “stretched” courses and the regular courses also enabled students to accumulate college credits and advance. Remedial courses at City did not carry college credit and neither did comparable SEEK courses. The 1966 CUNY Master Plan described SEEK students as “enrolled for some of their studies in regular college courses and for other studies in intensive or remedial sections…. [However,] those courses which are remedial will not carry any credit” (p. 29).

Moreover, Berger believed programs that placed students into full schedules of remedial courses were doomed to failure and that such placements “can basically be traced to the vacuousness or rigidity of such colleges…. Most importantly, remedial courses taught in a narrow context, are usually the most deadening, hope-draining courses ever invented” (Berger, 1969-70, p. 4). As such, in SEEK’s first two years, Berger and Ballard placed few SEEK students into remedial courses. For 35 years, City College had maintained a zero-credit, remedial writing course, English Five, covering “the mechanics of correct writing” (CCNY, 1930,
December, p. 222; CCNY, 1965, p. 67; Soliday, 2002, p. 54). But in Fall 1965, no SEEK students were placed into that course.

Instead of remedial courses, Ballard and Berger created stretched versions of mainstream courses that offered more hours of instruction than the mainstream sections, yet carried the same college credit. These courses advanced SEEK’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. Alternately called compensatory, intensive, stretched or basic courses, they were clearly distinguished from remedial courses. These courses had fewer students and were stretched to meet “for one or two more hours per week than regular courses covering identical material” (Levy & Berger, 1965, November, p. 22; Berger Dec. 1966 2-3; Berger 1968, October 15, p. 39). Berger also described “basic science” courses that were stretched by pairing them with small tutorial weekly workshops supervised by faculty members (Berger, 1969, October 21, p. 49). All these stretched courses offered college-level content (and credit) with added instruction in academic skills: “how to take notes… how you prepare for exams, how you read” (Ballard, 2014, p. 6). By 1967-68, 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, August 22, p. 1).

Berger and Ballard positioned their stretched courses as equal to other mainstream, credit-bearing courses, arguing that they “follow the syllabus of regular college courses” (Berger, 1969, October 21, p. 39). At City College in the mid-1960s, all required first and second year

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courses were informally referred to as “basic” courses.\textsuperscript{16} As such, Ballard and Berger sometimes
called their stretched courses “basic courses.” The basic SEEK courses also carried the same
course names and numbers as the mainstream basic courses. Of course, the plain meaning of
“basic” always includes a condescending note of simple and unsophisticated—and that
condescension was evident in its usage within a City College faculty culture that disdained all
first and second year courses in its “lower division” by labeling them as basic—as opposed to the
more sophisticated third and fourth year courses in its “upper division,” taught by more senior
faculty to students who had selected their majors. Complicating matters, English faculty
sometimes used “basic” more loosely to refer to basic elements or basic skills taught in both
mainstream and remedial English courses.\textsuperscript{17} Still, in a context where “basic” courses generally
meant mainstream, college-level courses, adopting the “basic” designation argued that these
SEEK courses were not remedial. While “remedial” was then (as now) a troubling term, Berger
and Ballard did not try to change it. They did not argue that SEEK students should receive

\textsuperscript{16} For example, in 1965 the Faculty Council Committee on Curriculum Teaching set the “basic
curriculum for the B.S. degree,” to include chemistry, physics, and foreign language courses.
(CCNY, 1965, May 3, p. 1). In a Faculty Council meeting English chair Edmund Volpe referred
to new “basic courses in science” as part of the core curriculum (CCNY, 1965, June 3, p. 1). In a
1965 English Department meeting, Volpe referred to the core English literature as both “the
basic curriculum” and as “the basic courses” (CCNY, 1965, October 7, p. 2). In another
meeting, other English professors also discussed a “new basic course in literature” and the “basic
literature sequence” (CCNY, 1965, December 9, p. 1, 1967, February 9, p. 2). They also
discussed syllabi for “a Basic Literature Course” that might cover Homer to Milton in English 3
and Swift to Chekov in English 4 (CCNY, 1966, February 10). In 1968, Assistant Professor
James Ruoff described a proposed version of English One as a “basic writing course,” which he
distinguished directly from the English 5 “remedial” writing course (Ruoff, 1968, p. 20).
\textsuperscript{17} A 1963 Curriculum Committee Report to the Faculty Council described a proposed version of
the remedial English Five as “no longer… conceived as a remedial course for the occasional
student [but] a basic course covering the fundamental principles of English grammar” (1963,
August 12, p. 1). In a 1968 English Department meeting, Ruoff described a new version of
English One as “an introduction to literature” including “basic elements of literature such as
symbolism, irony, point of view, etc.” The course would have a final departmental exam
including “the usual grammar section” (CCNY, 1968, April 4, pp. 1-2).
college credit for remedial work—which would have provoked fears and attacks about
diminished academic standards. Rather, Berger and Ballard built an argument that the bulk of the SEEK courses were not remedial in any sense, but rather were versions of the same demanding mainstream required courses taken by every student.

**Avoiding Failures with “J” Grades**

At City College, a non-punitive “J” grade had long been a substitute for “F” in some “special circumstances.” But failing students in college-level classes would normally receive an “F”. According the 1964-65 School of General Studies Bulletin, other grades for unsuccessful students included “G” for students dropped due to poor scholarship after the mid-term, “H” for excessive absences, “E” for students given a second chance at taking a final exam, and “Inc” for students who had not completed all work in a course. “Inc” and “E” grades were temporary only and would become “F” grades if students did not complete all course requirements promptly (pp. 33-34). Importantly, “D,” “F,” “G” and “H” grades all damaged a student’s academic standing. But a “J” grade did not; it was essentially a do-over grade (CUNY, 1964, p. 35). Academic standing was important to all students, but it was particularly critical for non-matriculated students (like all SEEK students) trying to earn full admission into the college. Admitted students could sometimes dip below a C/2.0 average and remain in good standing (p. 35). But non-matriculants were required to maintain at least a C average in each year of attendance (p. 29). In order to matriculate as baccalaureate degree candidates, non-matriculated students were required to complete some required courses and maintain either a B/3.0 grade point average over 14 or more completed college credits, a 2.75 GPA over 30 or more credits, or a C/2.0 average over 60 or more credits (p. 31). For all these purposes, punitive failing grades made success far more difficult.
To avoid such premature failures, Ballard and Berger repurposed “J” to replace all “F”s in SEEK courses. SEEK students could fail their mainstream courses—but not their SEEK courses, including their SEEK writing courses. Berger explained the idea: “if 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, 1969-70, p. 6). With these expanded “J” grades, instructors could hold back students who needed more time to master a course with minimal negative consequences for the student. This empowered the SEEK teachers to challenge students to do real college-level work. For example, in all of the Fall 1967 City College SEEK courses combined, students received a total of 43 A’s, 130 B’s, 162 C’s, 59 D’s, 93 P’s (some courses allowed a “pass” grade), 182 J’s and only 21 incompletes. Although students were therefore required to repeat 182 SEEK courses, those repeats did not damage their academic standing. Meanwhile, the SEEK students received 335 successful course grades (Ballard 1968, August 22, App I).

In particular, the SEEK English courses were stretched in three ways. First, the four hour English One course was stretched to five hours. Second, while the mainstream City College composition course requirement was reduced from two semesters to one semester in 1965 (discussed below in Chapter Seven), the SEEK program continued to require two semesters of writing. Third, SEEK teachers could use the “J” grades to stretch coursework across semesters for any individual student. As such, SEEK’s “stretched” course model anticipated (by about 25 years) the core concepts and structure of the 1992 Arizona State writing course stretch-model (Glau 1996, pp. 79-80).
SEEK Counseling

SEEK students met weekly with psychological counselors. Marvina White recalls that what “was beautiful about this program was that the counselors were very sensitive to the fact that there was a certain amount of hostility surrounding us, both from professors on campus and also from other students…” (2015, January 27, p. 9). White credits her SEEK counselor, Betty Rawls, as critical to her success:

What happened as a result of meeting with Betty was, it became clear that my performance in the classroom was suffering as a result of the ways in which I was having to manage life at home. And I wasn’t the only one…. many of us were having difficulty not with the work itself, but with understanding how to do the work given what was happening to us at home (p. 5).

In 1968, Berger credited the City College counseling program as successfully “individualizing the college experience for each student” and reducing “frustration and failure” (Berger, 1968, October 15, p. 76). 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” (1968, August 22, p. 5). In practice, efforts at formal psychological counseling did not always succeed. Francee Covington remembers group counseling sessions where a psychology Ph.D. student’s efforts to begin conversations were mostly met with silence “because it was not part of our culture, not part of African-American and Puerto-Rican culture to express things that are happening in your home with perfect strangers” (2015, June 8, p. 5). But, Covington felt like she could tell her writing instructors
anything that was happening with you, because you had established a rapport. And in
your writing classes you were talking about various things. So that served as an entre to
talk about other things as well. So even if you didn’t open up in the counseling—the
formal counseling sessions—you were able to get counseling. And… later on Charlie
Russell was a counselor and a lot of people gravitated to him, especially the young
men… (pp. 5-6).

Ballard noted that during 1967-68, a “potential source of difficulty… has been anticipated by the
addition to the staff this summer of three black and one Puerto Rican [counselors], thus giving us
a better racial mix on the [counseling] staff than obtained previously” (1968, August 22, pp. 6-7).

A SEEK Dormitory and Summer Jobs

From its inception, SEEK provided free tuition, books and weekly stipends. (Non-
matriculated students were not otherwise eligible for CUNY’s free tuition.) But it was soon clear
that some SEEK students needed even more financial assistance. In a 1966 memo to Gallagher,
Levy reported that, even with the support provided by SEEK, many students had “a difficult time
in preparing their homework because their living conditions make such study impossible. Some
of the students have no permanent dwelling places….many of them share a room with several
other occupants. About 10% of the current [SEEK] students must support themselves out of their
own meager sources of income. They have no family to turn to” (Levy, 1966, February 23, pp. 1-2).
Levy told Gallagher that new “living quarters” were badly needed. He also asked for
permission to create an internship program with New York City businesses (p. 2). Both projects
took some time; but in September 1967, SEEK opened a residence hall. In December of 1967,
SEEK began an employment development program that placed 600 SEEK students into summer
jobs, including a training program at CBS news (Berger 1968, October 15, pp. 18, 22-23; Covington, 2015, June 8, p.12; Wiltshire 2015, November 20, p. 6).

New York State Funding Expands SEEK (Summer 1966)

After two semesters, 72% (81/113) of the SEEK pilot class students were still at City College. Just over half of these remaining students had an average of C or higher (Berger, 1966 December, p. 3). This success quickly captured Bowker’s attention and support. The June 1966 CUNY Master Plan labeled the SEEK program “quite promising” (p. 29). On June 6, 1966, Gallagher told Levy that Bowker expected to fund another 100 City College SEEK students in the coming fall; Bowker was also seeking legislative support from Albany. Gallagher asked Levy to make only quiet “and direct recruiting efforts… until after the legislature has acted on our legislation” (Gallagher, 1966, June 6). Clark may have been involved; a 1976 SEEK report later credited him as writing the proposal for this state funding (1976, February, p. 3:2). Ballard and Berger both promoted SEEK with Albany politicians as well, although Ballard especially credits Berger as a “tireless” defender of the program. It was Berger who came up with the program’s new name: SEEK, meaning the “Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge” (Ballard, 2014, pp. 3-4). That same month, State Assembly members Percy Sutton and Shirley Chisholm led the fight to secure a million dollar appropriation for SEEK as a condition to approving expanded New York State funding for CUNY (Blumenthal, 1966, June 6; Edelstein, 1986, December 11, p. 1).

On July 14th, 1966, Bowker called a SEEK meeting that included Berger. “He expressed his interest and satisfaction with the City College [SEEK] Program” (Berger, 1966, July 27). Bowker asked City College to accept 100 new Fall SEEK students and he asked Brooklyn and Queens Colleges to start similar programs (Berger, 1966, July 27, p. 1). Berger began at once to
procure additional space, hire new staff, prepare new budgets and schedule new classes. His report two weeks later to Gallagher suggests not only that Berger was already SEEK’s functional administrator, but that he was negotiating directly with Bowker for support (Berger, 1966, July 27). Berger reported that Bowker had approved tenure-track lines for SEEK staff to be appointed through academic departments, as well as counselors appointed directly through the Chancellor’s office. The Chancellor approved weekly stipends up to $30. Berger was already “exploring the feasibility of finding a residence hall” (Berger, 1966, July 27).

On August 15, Bowker confirmed that the newly approved SEEK Program would at once dramatically expand with total funding of $1.4 million, including $400,000 of general CUNY funds approved on August 11th. Eight hundred recruitment letters had already been sent to the community agencies that would nominate the new SEEK students (Bowker, 1966, August 15, p. 1). At Bowker’s suggestion, Berger became City College’s official, full-time SEEK director (Bowker, 1966, August 15, p. 2; Berger, 1966, July 27). Clark continued his limited involvement, now as a member of SEEK’s new ten-person, community Advisory Council (CUNY, 1966, November, p. 5). Levy remained SEEK’s figurehead until July of 1966. Spending the summer conducting research in Malaga, Spain, Levy wrote to Gallagher and resigned his position as Director of the School of General Studies, asking to return to teaching duties (Gallagher, 1966, July 28; Levy, 1966, August 3). Gallagher replaced Levy as the Director of the School of General Studies with the Mathematics Department Chairman, Abraham Schwartz (“City College” 1966, September 28).

This flood of new funding called for an immediate, explosive SEEK expansion; the goal was to enroll 1,000 students in 1966-67. But in the resulting rush to desegregate CUNY, Bowker did not at first fully embrace Berger and Ballard’s carefully designed model. He divided the new
SEEK program into “college preparatory programs” modeled on City College, and expanded to Brooklyn and Queens. But Bowker also launched “evening session student aid programs” which provided funding, but no supportive programs, to non-matriculated students across CUNY (Bowker, 1966, August 15, p. 1). Although Berger was asked to offer advice to other new SEEK programs and did so, Brooklyn and Queens started up their own largely independent SEEK programs. In Fall 1966, Brooklyn launched with a modest 35 students and Queens admitted a more ambitious 117 full-time and 27 part-time students. Another 809 students were admitted to SEEK as non-matriculant, evening division students scattered across five CUNY community colleges and five four-year colleges—without any supportive programs (Board, 1966, November, p. 2).

The small Brooklyn program did reasonably well. It added 46 new SEEK students in the Spring and 68% of these students continued studying into their third semester (Berger, 1968, October 15, p. 83). The Queens SEEK program added 68 full-time and 168 part-time students in Spring 1967. But only 43% of the full-time Queens continued studying into their third semester. Only 19% of the part-timers continued into their third semester. Put another way, Queens admitted 380 SEEK students in 1966-67. Only 117 were still in the program a year later (Berger, 1968, October 15, p. 83).

And it was also immediately apparent that the 809 scattered non-matriculants were in trouble. Part of SEEK’s structure set up a SEEK Advisory Council of ten community leaders, including Kenneth Clark (Berger, 1968, October 15, pp. 10-12). On October 18, 1966, the Advisory Council met and recommended an additional $227,500 of CUNY funding for “additional tutoring and other special services” for these students (Board, 1966, November, p. 3). A November 1966 Chancellor’s Office Report to the Board of Higher Education also urged this
additional funding (Board, 1966, November, p. 3). But the bulk of these 809 students soon failed. By Berger’s count, only 515 (64%) registered for a second semester, 338 (42%) for a third, 262 (33%) for a fourth, 203 (25%) for a fifth, and 197 (24%) for a sixth.¹⁸ After September of 1966, no new SEEK students were admitted on this basis; by 1968, Berger had reduced them to a footnote in his SEEK report (Berger, 1968, October 15, p. 82).

In light of the low retention rates in all other SEEK programs, it was obvious that City College’s program was by far the superior model. And City’s much higher retention rates also made it the largest SEEK program. In September of 1966, City College admitted 191 new students (including Francee Covington, Marvina White and Eugenia Wiltshire). Eighty-one students from the 1965 cohort also returned for their third semester. City College then admitted 81 more new SEEK students in February of 1967, such that there were then 322 active SEEK students at City (Berger, 1968, October 15, p. 82).

In its second year, City College SEEK improved its retention rates: 227 of the 271 1966-67 students (84%) returned for a third semester (Berger, 1968, October 15, p. 83). In its first two years, most City College SEEK courses offered some college credit and SEEK moved its students quickly into mainstream courses. As such, students were able to progress steadily toward their degrees (Berger 1968, October 15, pp. 41-43; Berger 1969, October 21, pp. 52-54). For example, as of Spring 1968, 69% of the City College third-year SEEK students (40/58) had earned at least 48 credits and 53% (31/58) had earned at least 59 credits (Berger, 1968, October 15, p. 41).

¹⁸ (Berger, 1969, October 21, p. 104). Berger only counts 750 of these students in Fall 1966. I credit the higher 809 count in the Chancellor’s November 1966 report and compute the retention rates above from a starting cohort of 809.
On December 5, 1966, Bowker’s assistant wrote to Berger to thank him “for your cooperation in making SEEK the success that it has been…. [and] for your willingness to help others set up the necessary programs and materials to get started instantaneously. Without your assistance, it would not have been possible to mount such a large-scale program” (de Leon, 1966, December 5). Five months later, Bowker promoted Berger to be a University Associate Dean “responsible for the coordination of the SEEK Program on the various campuses, for the preparation of the University SEEK budget, and for the central administration of policies regarding SEEK” (Bowker, 1967, April 14).

**An Expanded SEEK Provokes a backlash at City College**

Looking back now on the success of SEEK, Ballard notes that “we all did put forth a valiant effort to change things…but…. Every revolution has a counter-revolution” (Ballard, 2014, p. 11). The counter-revolution against SEEK emerged as soon as the reality of CUNY’s expansion plans hit City College conservatives in September of 1966. The June 1966 CUNY Master Plan audaciously called for a stratified form of universal access by 1975. In this stratified plan, the top 25% City high school graduates would be offered senior college admission. The next 40% would be offered community college admission. But limiting this stratification, the College Discovery programs (now including SEEK) would offer places to another 10% of all high school students (Board, 1966, June, pp. 56, 58). Admissions elitism now faced a clear triple threat posed by systemic expansion, growing direct desegregation programs, and increased incoming transfer students coming from the mushrooming community colleges.

After two years of jockeying for substantial new Albany support, CUNY’s June 1966 amended Master Plan called for a $600 million building and expansion plan over six years to enable the system to serve far more students (p. 45). In July of 1966, Albany provided the
funding to realize this massive expansion: the State assumed half of CUNY’s operating budget and created a new “virtually unlimited construction fund” (‘Albany,’ 1966, June 30). In early July, Bowker announced he was “ready to roll” as CUNY planned to add 39,000 new full-time students to its existing 56,000 full-time students by 1972 (Buder, 1966, July 3). Gallagher warned that the Master Plan called for City College to admit about 1,000 more students in the Fall of 1967 than had entered in the Fall of 1966 (Gallagher, 1966, October 3, pp. 2-3). Until new buildings could be constructed for these added students, Gallagher authorized building temporary pre-fabricated buildings on the south lawn (p. 4).

To many at City College, the “SEEK Program was like an unwanted guest on the campus.” Now, with a massive jump from $125,000 to $1.4 million in total funding and a strong new mandate from Albany, it looked much more like “a permanent resident” and resentment began to grow among some white students (Warren, 1984, p. 36). Berger recalled that this new funding “placed attention on the SEEK program. Critics from far and wide as well as from the College itself began to appear” (1969-70, p. 11). Ballard could see that “a storm was brewing. There was a backlash against the program as regularly admitted students began to resent the presence of students brought in differently from them and of a different color. This was true too of some faculty members, many of whom adopted a condescending attitude toward both the students and faculty of the new program” (2011, p. 222).

In part, this resentment and fear was grounded in a myopic view of competitive self-interest. In 1973, Ballard (writing as a CUNY University Dean) observed that across the nation, admission of black students into white colleges “struck at the very heart of the faculty member’s interests” because they required changes to academic standards (p. 83). In the late 1960s, those who sought to guard City College’s elite reputation at all costs knew that elite academic
reputation was then (as it is now) a valuable form of social and educational capital that conferred real benefits in a competitive world. As such, defense of academic standards was a legitimate concern for faculty, students and alumni. Yet these academic fears were at once interwoven with larger, deeper fears and false assumptions: within a liberal New York academic culture that could not openly condone racial exclusion, defense of academic standards served as a respectable proxy argument for resistance to integration. Kopperman recalls: “Opposition to [SEEK and Open Admissions] was due in large part to irrational bigotry and a feeling that the world should not change”.\textsuperscript{19}

Ballard believed fears about standards had developed into an “inevitable… faculty backlash” at white colleges as soon as even small numbers of black students entered white colleges (1973, p. 83). He cited a nationwide survey of 60,000 faculty members, of whom more than half would have excluded minority students rather than relax admissions standards (1973, p. 83). More pointedly, Berger wrote that City “College’s initial response to SEEK was hostility bred by fear and ignorance. Educators declared in shrill tones that ‘the face of CCNY was changing’… while others immediately brought up issues of standards…. There was a significant sense of elitism among the college faculty” as some questioned whether these new students were “uneducable” (Berger, 1969-70 p. 12). Addison Gayle wrote that many City College faculty members were openly racist; in the fall of 1965, they at once “developed stratagems to limit [SEEK’s] effectiveness.” When SEEK expanded in 1966, “the opposition increased. The threat

\textsuperscript{19} (2016, April 8). Kopperman also recalls that some students and alumni whose families had long attended CUNY also feared that there would no longer be places for future generations; Kopperman notes that these predictions sometimes became self-fulfilling when these families sent their children to other colleges after 1970. Finally, some feared that CUNY’s educational standards would fall. But, to Kopperman, “by the time these new students graduated (at least in math), they knew the material the previous students had learned in order get their degrees. Thus a City College degree means the same now as it did 50 years ago, in terms of educational level, and in terms of bringing new groups into the middle class” (2016, April 8).
of even greater numbers of Blacks and Puerto Ricans brought forth new stratagems, this time to
destroy the program” (Gayle, 1971, p. 54). A 1976 CUNY SEEK Report also candidly
recognized that SEEK had been “[c]onceived in a time of national turmoil, implemented within a
fledgling university structure and opposed by a university community who feared a lowering of
standards and an on-rush of minorities…” (1976, February p. 2:1).

Geoffrey Wagner, by far the most unapologetically racist and sexist English professor at
City College,20 sent Marvina White away in tears when he “went ballistic” in a meeting where
she tried to explain that he was confusing her with the only other black student in his class
(White, 2015, January 27, p. 9). A math teacher gave Eugenia Wiltshire a D after she aced the
final exam; it was only years later that she realized the teacher did not believe she could have
earned the A, and so quietly reduced her final grade (Wiltshire, 2015, November 20, p. 8).
Francee Covington recalls a history instructor who required all SEEK students to stand up on the
first day of class “and then she proceeded to tell our fellow classmates that we were part of this
new experiment and we hadn’t gone through the usual channels to be at a university like City
College” (Covington, 2015, June 8, p. 8). Having been labeled, insulted and shamed, and
understanding now the racist assumptions held by her teacher, Covington became angry, but also
determined:

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20 In his bitter 1976 polemic, *The End of Education*, Wagner created an imaginary City College
student “Tyrone, sitting…with a transistor strapped to his afro, and nodding off every two
minutes….” (p. 134). He described City College as “becoming the senior class of Riker’s
Island” (p. 132). And Wagner was outraged about new student evaluation systems in which a
“group of dunces” (p. 43) and “the poor aborigine” (pp. 48-49) were not seen as unworthy to
evaluate him. Complaining that the “‘ghetto kids’ are the ones who count” (p. 49), Wagner
mockingly suggested that soon there might be evaluations “by only the most retarded
(‘disadvantaged’) students…. [maybe even only] Black ghetto female freshpersons” or “gay
Black ghetto” students (p. 49).
So, she immediately saw us as vulnerable, unworthy and ignorant—that we would never measure up. And the most stunning thing about it is she never realized that one: the people that she was castigating were the people who built the country that she now lived in and two: that great universities are not judged by their incoming students, they’re judged by their graduates. So if I have the ability to get in and get out with that sheepskin, it was equal to anybody else who graduated from that institution with the sheepskin (p. 8).

Covington also recalls that many classmates also “felt that we were undeserving to be there…” (p. 8). White remembers hostility from many classmates throughout her undergraduate years, including black students “who wanted to make sure that people knew they were not SEEK students” (p. 9).

In one example of student resistance to integration, on September 28, 1966, the City College Student Council passed a resolution demanding a voice in any future expansion decisions and strongly disapproving of any new buildings on south lawn, urging that the lawn be retained “for recreational use” (CCNY, 1966, September 28). Gallagher responded with a five-page letter that he also sent to the entire faculty with a cover memo in which he surmised that the letter discussed “questions I am sure some faculty members have asked themselves” (Gallagher, 1966, October 3). Gallagher observed that the discussions of expansion had been public, inclusive and ongoing for three years, leading to the decision that CUNY “should be able to afford to all New York City youths the kind of post-high school education which fits the needs and aspirations of each” (1966, October 3, p. 1). Treating the student’s resolution as an implied attack on SEEK itself, Gallagher defended the program vigorously as
in line with the Civil Rights efforts to which the whole nation is committed, and it is an affirmation of our faith in justice and equality…. as essential… as is our more traditional acceptance of the student who, through a more fortunate elementary and high school experience, has been able to demonstrate in advance that he has what it takes to make good at City College…. While the SEEK program is in existence, it adds to the necessity of providing more space—not at some point in the future, but now (p. 2). [Gallagher’s emphasis.]

Gallagher then chided the student council, stating that it would have been inappropriate to consult them about SEEK and he did not contemplate doing so in the future (p. 3).

The new 1966 City College SEEK students felt these powerful conflicts around them. They knew they were trailblazers. Covington recalls that “it was impressed upon us that as pioneers we would be paving the way for future classes if things went well. And we wanted things to go well. We wanted things to go well for us and we wanted to go—things to go well for the people who were to follow us” (2015, June 8, p. 5). As such, the SEEK students developed a strong sense of shared mission and community:

We were not in competition with each other at any time. If one of us did extremely well, we all celebrated, because we thought that person was in an envoy to the larger community. If someone… felt disheartened, we tried to give them heart, because we were the ‘change generation’ pretty much. We were the people that our ancestors had envisioned. And we were making sure that we supported each other as much as we could and we were delighted to do that. And I cannot think of a time when anyone asked me for help that I did not drop what I was doing to help them, because that’s what people did for me, including the SEEK instructors” (p. 12).
As other desegregation programs at CUNY struggled, as a conservative backlash to SEEK formed and strengthened, and as Berger and Ballard emerged as SEEK’s key leaders and theorists—they now had to develop and publish SEEK’s theoretical rationale in order to defend both their program and its students from conservative critics and to successfully export and expand their model.

From 1966 to 1973, Berger and Ballard theorized their work in a series of articles, speeches, reports, and in Ballard’s 1973 book, *The Education of Black Folk*. They rejected fears and false assumptions of superiority as they developed a comprehensive theory for their supportive teaching program. Berger and Ballard’s rationale for SEEK offered CUNY a viable, theoretically grounded model for more open and just admissions offered in combination with supportive, creative and challenging teaching systems that enabled all students to demonstrate their true college potential. As such, SEEK would soon serve both as a “proof of concept” and a theoretical rationale for CUNY’s Fall 1970 Open Admissions program.
Chapter Five

Theorizing SEEK (1966 -1973)

Berger and Ballard understood that they were fighting two connected struggles for racial justice at City College and City University. The first struggle was over access. The second was over instruction. In both, conservatives rallied around “academic standards.” When conservatives opposed desegregated, broader and fairer admissions, they rallied around admissions standards—essentially SAT scores and high school grade point averages. When conservatives saw they were losing the struggle to exclude diverse students from CUNY, they regrouped around “instructional standards,” which often meant promoting regressive pedagogies, labeling and stigmatizing students, and creating new instructional barriers to student success. As such, these two struggles became the two sides of the single, larger struggle for racial justice at CUNY: regressive pedagogies and instructional barriers were a direct conservative backlash to the desegregation of this formerly white system.

Berger and Ballard had to defend their SEEK students against the false assumptions of student inferiority that undergirded both racial exclusion and instructional backlash. They also had to explain their case for SEEK students’ abilities and potential and against regressive, ineffective teaching practices and pedagogies that would block SEEK students from developing and demonstrating their true potential. Complicating this rhetorical situation, Berger and Ballard had to address an audience that often wrapped itself in protective and deeply-conflicted myopia: even as CUNY faculty, students and alumni were forced to recognize CUNY’s obvious practice of racial exclusion, many at the same time denied that any systemic racism had caused that exclusion or otherwise shaped CUNY’s responses to desegregation.
Challenging The False Assumptions of Admissions Standards

Ballard knew that the sole rationale for racial exclusion by white colleges rested upon admission standards. College faculty and administrators believed that “a combination of high school averages and college entrance examination scores provided the best basis for evaluating a student’s potential for academic success” (Ballard, 1973, p. 81). Ballard observed that this belief was conveniently grounded in social, psychological and financial self-interest. If these metrics indeed identified the “best” students, they could also identify the “best” colleges and the most prestigious faculties (p. 81-82). High school grades and SAT scores were broadly and uncritically accepted as conclusive evidence that could accurately and fairly rank the most promising, best, brightest, most prepared, and worthiest “college material.” Therefore, accepting students with lower grades or SAT scores “posed a threat both to the status of professors and to the academic ‘quality’ of the colleges” (p. 83). Worse, in many minds (then, as now) SAT test scores and high school grades were quickly and easily conflated with academic and intellectual potential, with “potential” serving as a coded proxy term for innate ability. This false sense of superiority was so powerful that when students without high GPAs and SAT scores were admitted to elitist colleges, they would be stigmatized as inferior, unworthy, charity cases and they would be accused—by their mere presence—of diminishing cherished prestige and elite reputation.

Myrdal’s “American Dilemma” formulation had been rhetorically generous: the conflicts he catalogued between the American ideals of equality and the realities of racism were not true dilemmas in the sense of forced choices between conflicting, worthy values or goals. Myrdal’s “dilemma” was at heart merely a crisis of conscience. Berger argued that CUNY now faced just such a test of its conscience: “We have too long remained aloof from the appeals—indeed,
demands—of the educationally disadvantaged youth of this generation. If the capable among them do not go on to college, they will too often find themselves consigned to the streets of our Harlems, a tragic waste of our human resources where there might have been a burst of constructive leadership and a flowering of human potential” (Berger, 1968, October 15, p. 1).

Ballard knew that white faculties were not immune from false assumptions of racial inferiority. He recalled conversations with “scores of Black students” who had told him they faced an inevitable “preconception on the part of many white professors that to be Black was to be dumb” (Ballard, 1973, p. 71). These false assumptions had deep roots, because white “faculty members were products of a racist society” (p. 71).

Berger intended SEEK to be an experiment that would destroy “the assumption that college admissions standards had something to do with the success or failure of a college student” (Berger, 1969-70, p. 2). In a December 1966 City College Alumnus article about SEEK, Berger’s subtitle set out his premise: “An experimental effort to identify higher educational potential among disadvantaged youth may yield new data on the controversial question: how valid are current admissions criteria?” (p. 1). Careful not to alienate City’s alumni, Berger nonetheless argued that high school transcripts and SAT tests measured only “past achievement rather than potential ability” and unfairly reflected “middle-class cultural experience” (p. 1). As such, these invalid and culturally-biased metrics wrongly excluded “disadvantaged” applicants with potential college ability (p.1). Berger noted that “people on both side of the issue are emphatically questioning student selection methods” (p. 2). And he suggested that the debate over admissions standards might ultimately focus “attention on a reevaluation of teaching methods” (p. 2). Berger suggested instead that the best way to assess college ability was to challenge students to perform college level work (p. 3). Positioning SEEK as both “a challenging
experiment in creative teaching” (p. 3) and the continuation of educational opportunities that the School of General Studies had offered “for more than 50 years for thousands of students [with] differing educational backgrounds,” Berger explained that SEEK offered students a second chance to earn a path to graduation through a direct and more valid measure of their ability: the actual completion of college level work (p. 4). The New York Times reported on Berger’s article, capturing the heart of his argument in its headline: “City College puts grades to a test” (1966, December 25).

Berger developed and gradually expanded his attack on the validity of admissions standards in a series of articles and speeches from 1966 to 1971. He argued for assessment theory and practice that was fully aware of the harm racism and injustice inflicted on students. Berger argued that admissions standards were invalid on their face because they excluded non-white students—essentially a consequential validity argument. For example, in 1968, Berger observed that CUNY’s academic diploma requirement alone excluded the vast majority of black and Latino applicants (1968, October 15, p. 1). In a larger critique, Berger observed that 15% of American high school students were black but only 4% of American college students (300,000/6.7 million) were black; and half of those black students were enrolled in black colleges—leaving black students overwhelmingly excluded from white colleges (1969, July 18, p. 1).

But Berger also attacked the content and predictive validity of admissions criteria. He carefully deconstructed academic failure. While excellent high school GPAs “usually” indicated that ability, motivation, adequate study skills and a supportive environment were all present, low GPAs could be caused by “any or all of these variables being deficient” (1968, p. 382; 1969, July 18, p. 3). They could reflect “the inadequacies of our social and educational system” or
psychological or cultural characteristics. (1969, June 9, p. 9). Admission standards based primarily on high school grades and SAT scores “simply do not take into account the educational and environmental realities of our poverty areas…. [including] a formidable body of evidence to show how slum conditions and large city pubic schools have operated to prevent youngsters from reaching their potential” (1969, July 18, p. 2). As such, low high school grades proved very little about any student’s innate ability (1968, p. 383; 1969, June 9, p. 9). Instead, Berger argued that a more valid assessment would be 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). Ballard also 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” (1973, p. 98).

Clark had also raised a similar content validity attack on admissions criteria in a 1963 study with his City College colleague Lawrence Plotkin; there, they argued that mass tests completely failed to predict success among 508 surveyed black college students at 63 white colleges:

[SAT] scores, and those from similar examinations, cannot be used as a basis for predicting the academic success of the Negro students of this sample—or probably Negro students in general—in the same way that they are used to predict college success for more privileged white students….To rely of the alleged predictiveness of test scores in evaluating these students would ignore a major finding of this study and exclude many capable students from college (p. 26). [Emphasis by Clark and Plotkin.]

Clark and Plotkin found college success for these students was otherwise complicated. The “Ivy League and other prestige colleges” had the lowest dropout rates (p. 26). There was a correlation
between high school grades and college success (p. 23). Success also appeared tied to father’s occupation and parents’ college attendance (p. 24). And women (84.5%) were much more likely to graduate than men (77.3%), confirming that “racial discrimination in American society takes a higher toll of Negro males than Negro females” (p. 25). There was also “a clear relationship between degree achievement and income” (p. 24). But more “central are the motivational factors and the potential (as yet hardly measurable) of these students. Despite low income, they graduate at a high rate” (p. 24).

But Berger’s attack on the validity of admissions standards went much further and deeper than his fellow City College psychologists Clark and Plotkin. In a 1971 article (after CUNY had launched its open admissions program, and while he was a CUNY University Dean) Berger directly accused white college systems of systemic, intentional racism. De facto racial exclusion was neither accidental nor defensible: minority students had been excluded from white colleges in ways that were “more complex, hidden and well rationalized” than Southern direct racial exclusion. This de facto exclusion, argued Berger, was grounded in a view of education as a privilege rather than a right and in the false assumption “that we can differentiate between ‘educable’ and ‘non-educable’ persons (p. 45). Berger argued that the success of CUNY’s SEEK students had now proved that any effort to find a basis to “admit and deny” access to higher education was an invalid effort to preserve college as a scarce privilege—usually reserved for privileged students—rather than as a right for all students, all of whom had college potential (pp. 46-47). Chiding faculty members who “become the defenders of the status quo” and who raised battle cries about lowering standards, Berger questioned why so many really resisted admitting minority students. He suggested “the real issue is not educational at all” but rather whether
our society is willing to admit the ‘have-nots’ to the rights and privileges of the ‘haves’ through higher” education (p. 47).

Even as college administrators and professors “publicly [recognized] the profound fallacy in our admissions procedures and [admitted] to their prejudicial consequences,” Berger complained, they simply sought out “new bases to admit and exclude” as they clung to their elitism and failed to accept that “everyone can benefit from higher education and should be given an opportunity to develop himself to his optimal potential” (p. 47). Taking his argument to its logical conclusion, Berger asserted that the only fair, non-prejudicial admissions criteria is random selection, with enough facilities to give all students a fair chance to prove themselves. So long as resources were kept scarce, Berger warned, those with “reserved privileges” in the existing system would continue to limit the “have-nots” to tokenism (p. 48).

In his 1973 book, The Education of Black Folk, Ballard (who was also then writing as a CUNY University Dean) joined Berger to argue bluntly that the exclusion of black students from white colleges was both deliberate and structural—in Ballard’s view, part of a larger, century-long pattern of racism in American education which he traced in detail. “Even Abolitionists doubted that Blacks were educable…. Their suspicion of inherent African mental incapacity dominated and, indeed, has never vanished from American thought” (p. 12). Ballard mocked the skewed views of 1960’s white researchers who criticized the Southern black teachers who had battled illiteracy under the most hostile conditions. Such white researchers, scoffed Ballard, could not possibly understand “the creative task of educating the Black children who sat in classes before them, sometimes tubercular, sometimes hungry, sometimes shuddering with thoughts of parents assaulted by whites” (pp. 23-25). Ballard argued that this same racism continued to poison education within American public schools. “So almost from the moment a
Black child enters into most white kindergarten teachers’ classes… the youngster is expected to conform to an inferior stereotype. Thus begins a deadly cycle. The children understand quickly that little is expected of them and they, in turn, begin to conform to the expected” (p. 77).

Echoing Myrdal, Clark, King and Brown, Ballard argued that the failures of the schools and the resulting harm to black students was directly caused by these long-held false presumptions of white superiority (p. 77). As such, Ballard made it clear that affirmative action in college admissions was not merely a present remedy for past discrimination; rather it compensated for and remediated the real, powerful and deeply harmful effects of existing intentional and structural racism on students that both disguised and damaged their abilities and potential. Any “educational imbalance built upon a long history of injustice cannot easily be destroyed” and required more than mere “[p]eripheral attention” to entering students who were “suffering the consequences of that injustice….”

The Stark Realities For Non-Matriculants

All SEEK students from Fall 1965 until Spring 1968 entered as non-matriculants, following the model that Bowker (with Clark’s assistance) had proposed in February of 1964 (Buder, 1968, August 3). The non-matriculant path had long offered some students a “second chance” for admission to CUNY’s colleges. As of 1966, students could enter City College as non-matriculants and take evening classes if they had a 75% high school average (equal to a C) or scored 300 on the SCAT, a college skills test. They could study at City and eventually be fully

21 (1973, p. 75). Ballard was not personally close to Clark and he remembers Clark as having no direct influence in shaping the SEEK program. But Ballard knew of Clark and Davis’s roles in the Brown case. More importantly, Ballard knew Clark’s 1964 Youth in the Ghetto study and his 1965 book Dark Ghetto, which Ballard credited as major contributions to the intensity of the Black movement of the 1960s and an early example of using “community controlled structures as a counterforce to government agencies” that trapped ghetto inhabitants into desperate and powerless circumstances (1973, pp. 62-63).
admitted if they maintained a C average or better each year. About 1,000 new students entered City College on this basis each year, representing a third of the entire School of General Studies (Berger & Johnson, 1966, March 15, p. 4).

By comparison, City College admitted only 1,957 regular first year day students in the Fall of 1964 (CCNY, 1964, December 10). One element of City’s elitist myopia was that it measured its elite status only through the credentials of its regularly admitted Day Division students, even though the Evening Division student body was actually larger: in 1964 there were 12,410 day division undergraduates and 13,408 evening division undergraduates (CCNY, 1964, December 10). The non-matriculated students were much more likely to be poor and black or Latino (Berger & Johnson, 1966, March 15, p. 4). For example, in Fall of 1967, 4.2% of City College matriculated students self-identified as black and 1.9% as Puerto Rican. But 28% of the non-matriculated students identified as black and 8.4% identified as Puerto Rican (CUNY, 1968, December, app. 2). The non-matriculated students entered with much lower academic credentials than the regular admits. They paid tuition. And they were largely and conveniently invisible to the College until a small percentage earned enough good grades to matriculate as regular students.

For Richard Sterling, the non-matriculant option at City College was an amazing opportunity. As a young rabble-rouser, Sterling had been kicked out of academic high school in England; instead, he completed a vocational engineering program. Soon Sterling emigrated to New York and found work as an engineer. In about 1965, at about age 25, he was able to begin taking night courses at City by concealing that he had never graduated high school in England (Sterling, 2015, March 28, p. 1). As a temporary, non-admitted student, Sterling paid tuition. He studied hard, worked full-time, slept little, and gradually built up enough successful course
grades to matriculate into the Day Division. At this point, City officials discovered that Sterling had never completed high school. But based on his college work, City admitted Sterling anyway. He went on to graduate and become a SEEK college writing teacher at City and at Lehman College (Sterling, 2015, March 28, pp. 2-4). Sterling remembers City College in those days as “exhilarating,” a world of ideas and arguments where “the classes would spill over into the evening and would go from the cafeteria to a bar to a restaurant. I mean, it never seemed to stop” (Sterling, 2015, pp. 1-2). But it was also a highly competitive culture where new students would be warned: “‘Look to your left, look to your right, only one of you will be here in four years’” (Sterling, 2015, March 28, p. 3).

Berger knew that the reality for these non-matriculates was grim. “When we looked at what happens to persons who enter the part-time evening session programs, it is rather devastating. The results surprised even us…. by the end of the second term, 60 per cent are lost. By the end of the fourth term, 81 per cent of these students are lost. By the end of the sixth term 88.2 per cent are lost. And by the end of the eighth term 93 per cent are lost” (1967, May 9, p. 4). As such, it perhaps should not have surprised CUNY administrators that their decision to simply scatter 809 SEEK applicants across ten CUNY campuses as non-matriculates in the fall of 1966 would lead to a 58% dropout rate within a year (Berger, 1969, October 21, p. 104).

But Berger also knew that admissions standards did not explain these massive failure rates among City’s non-matriculated students. A 1955 study of 941 successful non-matriculates had found that C students in high school were, on average, also successful C students at City College. This led Levy and Berger to predict in 1965 that SEEK students with a C averages in high school would have a 50% chance of succeeding with a C average at City College (Levy & Berger, 1965, p. 18, app. I). But Berger also observed that while half of all non-matriculates left
City College before completing 15 credits, more than half of the drop-outs were in good academic standing. Students were quitting for reasons that had nothing to do with their potential or ability. Berger hypothesized that the reasons were financial and psychological (Berger & Johnson, 1966, March 15, pp. 5-7).

A study conducted by Berger and his colleague Kenneth Johnson in the summer of 1966 offered a sobering portrait of these non-matriculant students. They identified and surveyed all 1,075 non-matriculant students who: 1) had dropped out from in the Evening Division in 1960-61 and 1961-62; 2) after successfully completing at least two or more college courses; 3) but who had never requested copies of their transcripts. (This last requirement presumably confirmed that they had not continued college at any other school.) Berger and Johnson invited these former students to come to City College for an interview with a counselor and to complete a written survey. “The only assurance given to them was that their cooperation would enable the College to better understand problems confronting students in the Evening Division” (p. 7). In these interviews, the counselors explored the student’s reasons for dropping out; they also encouraged them to return (pp. 1-4).

Berger and Johnson were at once confronted with the harsh realities of working class existence. After only four to five years, they could not find most of these former students at all; 475 letters were returned as undeliverable. After they sent second letters to the remaining 600 former students, they could only identify 360 good telephone numbers.

Even in general, students who drop out of any college move, marry, join the Army, change their names, go to Europe, go "underground," and, in a thousand other ways, become difficult and sometimes impossible to locate. When the group comes, for the largest part, from disadvantaged backgrounds, these problems become even more acute.
There is more moving, more new marriages, more broken marriages, and more residence with stepfathers, half-sisters, or more distant relatives. There is less stability, less forwarding of mail, less helpful concern and interest from neighbors and families. (In a few cases, anxious parents or wives actually concealed or destroyed our initial contact letter to the dropout.) (p. 4).

In the end, 64 former students both completed written surveys and came in for interviews. These students mostly came from single parent homes, usually due to the death of a parent. More than half came from the City’s designated poverty areas. Although most had taken academic subjects in high school, two-thirds had not begun college directly after high school. Sixty percent had begun college by age twenty; the rest had longer gaps; the oldest had entered college at age 42. About ten had served in the military. Most had started working before they were seventeen. Only 13 of 64 had a parent who had attended college. Their fathers mostly worked in semi-skilled or unskilled jobs. For 70%, working during college was an “absolute financial necessity” and most of the rest worked as well. By the time of interviews, over half were married and seven more were separated, divorced or widowed (pp. 7-9).

Most students reported their decision to drop out had been a “lonely and tentative” one. Most had planned to return or to transfer to another college. Instead, most simply went to full time jobs and some added second jobs. They had high aspirations and they saw education as a means for vocational advancement. But their average annual income was between $5,000 and $7,500; twenty earned less than $5,000 per year (pp. 10-12). All had shown academic promise; yet in most cases, dropping out “meant a termination of higher education and a thwarting of potential” (p. 13). In the questionnaires, most students cited finances and inability to concentrate
as the major reasons they dropped out. But in the interviews, they cited “pressures from home, family and personal problems” (p. 14). In sum:

The lack of parental support, both financial and academic, blights motivation at an early stage, usually during high school. The typical student of our group then goes to work before he completes high school and does not actively consider college. It is the easiest choice, and can be explained by financial necessity. After some years in the world of work, the student realizes how he has blighted his hopes for the future by his curtailment of education, and how he has squandered his talents and capacities. Older now, with family obligations already begun or at hand, he enters college and tries to move ahead. For the disadvantaged particularly, though, he does not really feel that he belongs. A host of pressures, stemming from [poverty], from prejudice, and their consequences, beset him as he proceeds. He wonders whether it is all worthwhile. Finally, for many, the pressure becomes too great and a "temporary" decision to leave is made (p. 15).

The counselors encouraged two-thirds of the students to return to City College. Within a few months, over twenty had applied for readmission and more were calling or writing to ask for help to reapply. One student, reached on military duty in Viet Nam promised to come for an interview when he got home. “You can’t imagine what it means to me to know that back there someone remembers that I left college and cares about what happened to me” (p. 16). But, for some it was too late. One woman told the researchers: “Now that I’m separated from my husband and have a child to support, I have to work—and college is out. I hope you can help some others not to make my mistakes” (p. 16).
Challenging The False Premises of Instructional Standards

In several articles between 1966 and 1969, Berger admitted that high school GPAs might predict success among college students “if the educational approach in college is essentially the same as it was in high school, and if there is no change in the student’s environment or motivation….“ But where colleges were willing to change their instructional models, he argued that the predictive value of GPAs disappeared. SEEK was his proof. In 1968, Berger matched the 1965 SEEK class (then in their sixth semester) with a comparable group of regular City College non-matriculants who had “identical high school achievement, high school attended, and neighborhood background.” Berger found that while 52% of the original 1965 SEEK students were still studying into their sixth semester, only 12% of the non-matriculants would have persisted that far (1968, p. 388).

The very idea of offering non-matriculated students a “second chance” suggested an institutional benevolence that ignored the systemic racial injustice that frequently denied “first chances.” Worse, for close to 93% of the 1,000 students each year who entered as non-matriculants, City College’s “second chance” was an empty promise and a revolving door. But SEEK proved that the massive failure rates of those students did not reflect their ability or potential. Rather it reflected the institution’s failure to support, counsel, guide and challenge them to develop and realize their potential. SEEK provided them with a real chance to compete and succeed.

\[22\] (1968, p. 383; 1969, July 18, pp. 3-4). Again Berger echoed Clark’s 1964 HARYOU study, which in advocating Harlem tutorial programs, questioned “whether submitting the child who has already experienced defeat in school to the same teachers, classroom settings and general atmosphere, is likely to result in any great educational achievement. The study argued that any effective remedial program would require revised curriculum, advanced teaching techniques and materials, a stimulating atmosphere, and generally increased motivation” (pp. 415-416).
Ballard observed that faculty saw themselves as the defenders of “the sanctity” of instructional standards. Any student who could not maintain acceptable grades “would be asked to leave, even at the end of his first semester, because he was not of college caliber” (1973, p. 82). Faculty fears about admissions and instructional standards were interwoven because admitting “marginal” students required “some measures to ensure their academic success…. ranging from special courses and faculty for such students to changes in retention standards” (1973, p. 83). These fears about “lowered” instructional standards led faculties to embrace regressive and antagonistic pedagogies and to erect new barriers to student success.

But in his “charge” to a March 1971 CUNY conference of Open Admissions teachers and administrators, Ballard urged teachers to embrace a teaching “process where the student comes to the fore,” and to open themselves “to different ways of doing things” (p. 12). Recognizing that actions which felt natural for those with “a certain sense of justice,” could often be unnatural for an “academic apparatus,” Ballard called for new systems “to literally surround the student in need of help from the time he enter[s] college until the time he [is] ready to stand on his own two feet” (p. 12). In the end, Ballard urged the conference to strive “for a viable way of educating people who previously have been labeled uneducable” (p. 13).

Similarly, Berger argued that college education “need not be a static process but could become a dynamic one…. [where] a change in the teaching process will bring about a change in the probability of college success…. There is a growing recognition that colleges can no longer set up obstacle courses and then sit back and passively observe the results of the race” (1967, May 9, pp. 1-2). Instead of expecting students to assimilate and conform to fixed preconceptions, Berger proposed a new model which first identifies “the population that must be serviced and
[builds] a program” to serve them well. This method, Berger argued, was the best way of fairly and truly “discovering ‘college material’” (1968, p. 383).

Berger repeatedly pointed out that college success and failure are complex, depending not merely on variables relating to the student, but also variables controlled by colleges, such as: “quality and method of instruction, exposure to different kinds and amounts of remedial teaching, counseling, financial assistance, medical care and living arrangements” (1968, p. 383; 1969, June 9, p. 9; 1969, July 18, p. 3). Therefore any classroom failure was a shared responsibility where, if students were not succeeding, “the teachers are expected to question themselves and explore different approaches” (1968, p. 386.) As such, Berger saw SEEK as “a challenging experiment in creative teaching” (1966, December, p. 3). In its first four years, SEEK’s experimental, student-centered pedagogy led to “almost constant revision” of the program (Berger, 1969, October 21, p. 46).

Referring to open door admissions policies as merely a “necessary first step,” Berger emphasized that open access was not enough to make higher education fair to all students. Without deep conceptual reform of the purpose of higher education, he argued, open door policies could become illusions, as the open door became “in fact a revolving door, admitting everyone, but failing a built-in proportion after a short time” (1971, p. 47). Instead, Berger urged colleges to “accept the responsibility to teach all persons and to provide an environment that is conductive to learning” so that open door admissions do not become “in reality a stratified admission procedure in which students are admitted at various levels into the university, based on past achievement” (1971, p. 47).
Psychological Support Within SEEK

In a February 1967 position paper, Berger first outlined his theory psychological and emotional support within SEEK. He described SEEK students as often arriving poorly prepared to compete successfully in an unfamiliar, “middle class oriented” college (p. 2). Many had experienced “a high incidence of social and family pathology” (p. 3). Many “have developed negative self-images” and did not expect to succeed (p. 3). And these students tended “to view all authority, including college staff, with suspicion and sometimes outward hostility” (p. 3). As a result, Berger believed some SEEK students failed to develop sufficient “ego autonomy,” an awareness of their agency that enabled them to adapt relatively easily to new situations (pp. 3-4).

Berger viewed ego development as an emotional, not an intellectual process, grounded in relationships between people. Berger designed SEEK to encourage SEEK counselors to become “involved intimately in the life of the student” and to build trust, centering the counselor to “play an active and continuous role in the student’s life” (pp. 4-5). The counselors urged students to believe in themselves while protecting them from further harm by the often-uncaring bureaucratic institution itself. Berger warned that it “is important, however, that this strategy not be experienced as one of attempting to socialize students or of encouraging them to accept roles presented by the majority world” (p. 4). Counselors provided “support and encouragement” and communicated “a feeling of acceptance and respect,” but also assisted “with reality testing” (p.2). Where students realized they had real gaps in knowledge, skills and sophistication:

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). If “sufficient evidence becomes available indicating that a student is not educable on the college level,” the psychologist could help the student to develop an “alternative vocational objective” (p. 3). In this way, students would decide their own educability—a self-directed decision based on their actual experience of attempting challenging work in a supportive environment, guided by a sympathetic counselor dedicated to their success.

Once confidence and self-awareness was built up, the counselor’s role could shift to developing students’ senses of agency. “As students form clear and realistic goals, they begin to perceive some significance for themselves in what they are asked to learn. Through positive experiences in the learning situation, motivation increases” (pp. 5-6). Berger believed true psychotherapy should be offered when needed—but he noted that only 10% of SEEK students had received it (p. 7). Nonetheless, the principles of therapy applied to all counseling: “In psychotherapy, the therapist must meet the individual on his own ground, no matter who they are. In our work with disadvantaged persons, it cannot be too strongly emphasized that there is a prime necessity to fully understand the cultural background” (p. 7).

Berger even saw a role for counselors to assist SEEK teachers:

As in therapy, students subject their instructors to considerable testing, to which the instructors often react with considerable hostility. Some teachers feel guilt toward the disadvantaged student; and instead of teaching them, they want to ‘take care of them’. To love them, however, is not enough. In fact, this kind of attitude is often a cover for
prejudice, resentment and lack of trust in the ability of these students to achieve success on the college level. At times teachers who started out with great enthusiasm become resentful, apathetic and ready to diagnose their students as uneducable when the students fail to respond “sufficiently” (p. 9).

Although counselors did not engage instructors in therapy, they supported them “by expressing… appreciation for the difficult role they must play.” Berger recognized that teaching in SEEK “is not a high prestige position in the academic departments; and this further contributes to the insecurities of the teacher” (p. 9). A counselor could also share insights about students and “encourage and assist the instructor in an experimental approach to teaching” (pp. 9-10).

Three months later, Berger offered a less technical version of SEEK’s psychological support in a May 9, 1967 speech and workshop with SUNY financial aid officers. He explained that SEEK had maintained a student to psychological counselor ratio of fifty to one, with ten full-time counselors at City College for 500 SEEK students. This was “quite shocking to many” in a college that otherwise had five counselors for a student body of about 20,000 students (p. 5). Berger said that SEEK accepted “full responsibility” for its students by meeting them where they were and making every possible attempt to teach them “so that they can succeed in college” (p. 18). This responsibility also meant that SEEK never dropped students without a new plan. “We have, at no point, informed any student that he cannot be helped…. he is helped to get into another program, whether or not it’s a two year college or a terminal sub-professional program, or a job placement, or something…. We do not let a student go out from the college and really add to the frustrations and failures he had before he came to us” (pp. 18-19).
Berger recognized that students did not arrive at college wanting “to be counseled.” Rather, counselors had to become involved in students’ lives “in every possible way” to avoid losing them; this was not formal “therapeutic” counseling, and was not “geared to change them” (p. 15). Instead, counselors helped students with financial advice and planning, registration and curricular guidance. In sum, the counselor “is the one who has to take care of anything and everything that the student will do while he is in this program” (p. 16). Berger wanted to develop a “new breed” of psychological counselors who were willing to forget what they learned in school, and instead be flexible, learn new skills and “really approach the students…” (p. 16).

Berger’s views about counselors were also shaped by his ongoing debate with Ballard who advocated for more black counselors and a more practical emphasis:

I told him these kids didn’t have psychological problems, they had problems of economic and social survival thanks to their status as poor blacks and Puerto Ricans. Cure those problems or deal with them—siblings on drugs, parents in prison, parents asking them to chip in to the family from their weekly stipends—and their academic burdens at CCNY would definitely be lightened. Les didn’t deny this but felt a well-trained, empathetic counselor would be able to surmount any difficulties when it came to relating to the students (Ballard, 2011, p. 222).

At first, Berger hired almost all white psychologists as counselors. Betty Rawls, a young graduate student, was the only black SEEK counselor at City; but in 1967, Ballard convinced Berger to compromise and bring in several black and Puerto Rican counselors with degrees in social work (Ballard, 1968, August 22, p. 6-7; 2011, p. 222).
**Berger and Ballard’s Theory of Programmatic Assessment of SEEK**

Berger and Ballard were under extraordinary pressure to conduct almost constant programmatic assessments of SEEK programs and students. At City College alone, SEEK answered in different ways to department chairs, the Faculty Council, a Community Advisory Council, President Gallagher, Chancellor Bowker, CUNY’s Board, and the New York State Legislature. In his 86 page, 1968 SEEK Report, Berger recognized the need for “continuous evaluation” of SEEK; but he also 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 systemically explore and develop new approaches” (Berger, 1968, October 15, p. 75).

Berger and Ballard’s reports focused on direct, real metrics of success: “retention rates, number of credits earned and grade average earned…” (Berger, 1968, October 15, pp. 75-76). Berger and Ballard then used these assessment metrics to support their argument that their students were as able as any others. For example, in 1968, Ballard reported that 62 out of 83 SEEK students in a mainstream English 3 class had earned successful grades of A, B or C. And Ballard pointed out that a “roughly similar pattern of achievement prevailed” in mainstream history, biology and sociology courses as well (Ballard, 1968, August 22, p. 1). These programmatic assessment metrics of retention, course grades and accruing college credits created no barriers to student success—indeed they unified the program around the common goal of achieving real success for its students.

These measures also trusted and empowered teachers; they encouraged teachers to try creative approaches and to examine their practices to eliminate any unproductive or unsuccessful methods. Because SEEK was a bridge program to mainstream courses, there was little incentive
for SEEK teachers to inflate grades. To the contrary, Berger argued that SEEK teachers, feeling institutional pressures, were “perhaps more rigorous, and more restrictive in their grading…” such that the SEEK students actually received slightly higher over all grades in their mainstream classes.23

**Berger’s Clinical Model of Assessment**

Psychologists and educators share common standards of assessment. The first jointly published statement of these standards was issued in 1966; the fifth joint statement was published in 2014 (AERA, 2014, p. vii). But clinical psychologists and public educators often use these common standards in very different ways. Public college educators often assess large groups of students. Mass assessments in education can have intended negative consequences for students who fail them—as is true for any admissions or certification exam. In large systems, educators furthest from actual students can control and interpret assessments. Students and their teachers may have little or no voice. Tests and test scores can be adopted for invalid or unintended purposes. They can be biased. Indeed, public college assessments sometimes deploy mass assessments in ways that simply disregard validity standards and ignore their devastating consequences. For example, critics have argued that CUNY’s uses of high-stakes writing tests since 1978 have raised all these concerns (CUNY, 1996, Spring; Shor, 1997; Gleason, 2000; Huot, 2002, pp. 47-48; McBeth, 2006).

By contrast, clinical psychologists, like Berger, make diagnostic assessments of individual clients to ensure appropriate treatment. True diagnostic uses of assessment tools are individualized, ongoing and critical, using the strongest available evidence to benefit clients.

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23 (1967, May 9, p. 22). The non-punitive “J” grades in the SEEK courses also made rigorous standards easier to maintain in SEEK courses, allowing teachers to stretch teaching across semesters without hurting the academic status of their students.
Clinical assessment strategies should provide measures that are precise, sensitive to change, minimally inferential, and well validated for a particular assessment purpose and person…”, all subject to appropriate interpretation by “by the clinician.” Failure to do so “can harm clients in that it can adversely affect clinical judgments and diminish the outcomes of intervention efforts with a client” (Haynes, Smith & Hunsley, 2011, p. 3).

This clinical approach was precisely the student assessment model that Berger and Ballard built into the SEEK program. As a clinician, Berger placed his diagnostic faith in the directly observed evidence of teachers, counselors and students themselves. SEEK’s pedagogy met all students where they were, and provided them with individualized, ongoing evaluation, support, guidance and challenge in order to maximize their potential to compete, succeed and graduate. Even Berger’s critiques of admissions assessments and instructional assessments were similarly grounded in this same sophisticated and supportive assessment model.
Chapter Six
The Success, Expansion and Replication of the SEEK Model (1966-2016)

In July of 1968, Gallagher asserted that SEEK was now recognized as “the largest and most effective program of its kind in the country” (Gallagher, 1968, July 2). A year later, in a speech to the first convention of “Educational Opportunity Programs in Higher Education,” Berger asserted that CUNY’s SEEK program was then “considerably larger than any other experimental program” (1969, July 18, p. 7). In December 1969, Vice Chancellor Timothy Healy described CUNY as running the two largest college adapter programs for the disadvantaged in the United States.” Those “college adapter” programs were SEEK and the smaller College Discovery program in CUNY’s two-year colleges.24

Beginning in about 1965, other white four-year colleges began to develop desegregation programs; but many were very limited. For example, a December 1967 article profiled three desegregation programs: Cornell (150 active students; 70 admitted in 1967), Manhattanville College (27 students), and University of Washington (50 students) (Lapkin, 1968, January 5). In 1968, a *Southern Education Report* profiled five more: University of Wisconsin (60 students admitted each year) (Egreton, 1968, April, p. 26), Wesleyan (90 students admitted over three years) (p. 28), Southern Illinois (100 total students, all admitted in 1966) (pp. 31-32), Antioch College, (49 total admitted students) (p. 33), and Berkeley (424 total admitted students) (p. 34). Notably, 50% of the 90 Wesleyan students (p .29) and 40% of the 424 Berkeley students (p. 34) were qualified for regular admission, making the special admissions programs at these colleges

24 More research would be necessary to confirm Gallagher, Berger and Healy’s claims that SEEK was the largest desegregation program in the country (and College Discovery was second) in 1968 and 1969. Nationwide, many two-year colleges were newly opened, with broad access and an egalitarian, teaching-focused mission. Many never practiced the same racial exclusion that was endemic at white four-year colleges—complicating any comparisons of desegregation and special access programs at the two-year college level.
much smaller and also evidencing the newly increased competition among white colleges for highly credentialed students of color.

By comparison, in February of 1968, SEEK had admitted 2,638 students (about 90% of them black or Latino) across CUNY and 1,845 were still studying there (Berger, 1969, October 21, p. 104). By the Spring of 1969—in only four years—CUNY SEEK had boomed from a pilot program with a total budget of $125,000 to an annual $8.25 million program (Berger, 1969, July 18, pp. 4-5). By February of 1969, SEEK had admitted 3,962 students and 3,006 of these SEEK students were still studying across CUNY (Berger, 1969, October 21, p. 104).

**The Continued Success of City College SEEK (1966-1974)**

As SEEK expanded from 1965 to 1969, Berger and Ballard ran its most effective and largest program at City College. The other CUNY SEEK programs improved during these years with rising retention rates, but SEEK’s overall reputation was directly based on its success at City College. From September 1965 to June 1969, City College’s overall 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%). Each of these retention rates was higher than comparable rates at any of the other six SEEK programs that were in operation across CUNY by Spring of 1969 (Berger, 1969, October 21, p. 105).

These high retention rates, along with new incoming first-year students and transfers, fueled rapid expansion. By Spring of 1968, total active City College SEEK enrollment was 481 students (Berger, 1968, October 15, p. 39). A year later, City College SEEK enrollment had
jumped to 700 students. In July of 1969, a stand-alone “University Center” SEEK program based at the Almanac Hotel was placed under the jurisdiction of City College—adding 654 more SEEK students under City’s administration (Berger, 1969, October 21, pp. 82, 104). Many of these University Center students soon transferred to City College. For example, City College SEEK expected 184 transfers from the University Center in the Fall of 1970 (Traube, 1970, June 19).

SEEK graduated its first student, Karen Sheppard, from City College in 1969 (“In Retrospect,” 1974, June 28). Francee Covington, Marvina White, and Eugenia Wiltshire all graduated in less than five years. In April of 1972, the City College SEEK program reported that 112 of the 557 SEEK students who entered City College by September of 1967 had graduated and 118 were still in attendance—a 41% retention/graduation rate. And 119 more SEEK students were expected to graduate in June of 1972, bringing the overall graduation rates for these early SEEK cohorts to about 40% (Frost, 1972, April 19). In 1973, Adrienne Rich also reported that 35 to 40% of these early City College SEEK students (208 in all) had already graduated from City College and that two-dozen had gone on to graduate school (1973, p. 260). By June of 1974, City College SEEK had already graduated 560 students and the June 1974 graduating class included another 225 SEEK students. Three had already earned M.D.s. Others were graduate students at NYU, Yale, UCLA, Columbia, CUNY, Adelphi, Fordham, U Conn, “and numerous other schools throughout the country” (“In Retrospect,” 1974, June 28).

Berger had always seen SEEK as an experiment that would challenge the validity of admissions standards; now the experiment had produced compelling evidence. When black and

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25 (Berger 1969, October 21, p. 104). Berger’s reported overall admissions and retention numbers vary slightly from the details in the City College section of his report, showing a total Spring 1969 SEEK Population of 731, including incoming transfer students (p. 46).
Latino students who lacked elite admissions credentials were offered a supportive, sophisticated and challenging teaching environment that remediated the harm inflicted on them by racism and injustice, they had the same potential (and almost the same odds) as students with those elite credentials to compete, succeed and graduate. Faced with the enormous success of SEEK, even the conservative former English Department Chair 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).

**SEEK as the Prototype for Open Admissions**

In 1976, a SEEK report to CUNY Chancellor Robert Kibbee recounted that SEEK had been “the chief encouragement” for launching Open Admissions in 1970 and that OA’s “chief promise of success—came from the success story of the SEEK program. SEEK was and is the demonstration prototype for Open Admissions” (CUNY, 1976, February 3, p. 3:18). Healy’s December 1969 *Saturday Review* article also strongly evidenced the theoretical influence of SEEK on Open Admissions.26 And Healy noted that a special CUNY “University Commission on Admissions” of college presidents, faculty, students and community representatives had reported in 1969 that the “best way of determining whether a potential student is capable of college work is to admit him to college and evaluate his performance there” (1969, December).

Healy himself mocked “the main attack” on Open Admissions, which was “being pressed under the banner of ‘academic standards’” amid fears about “lowering standards.” Healy admitted that “‘standards’ has a fine ring, and, like motherhood, [it’s] something not even the

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26 By this time both Berger and Ballard were University Deans and Ballard reported to Healy. (Ballard, 2011, pp. 227-28).
most radical of college innovators can be caught disapproving of.” Yet, Healy asserted, this was a false argument because existing admissions criteria were invalid. Grades and test scores had been used by most colleges for admissions only for 25 years, and these “‘objective’ criteria” admission policies were riddled with various dubious exceptions. But, Healy argued, the “even deeper equivocation” was the claim that these criteria “are significantly revealing or predictive about what a student will do in college…. There are many areas of talent and ability that our tests never reach…. It is a rare human being who, in this technical society, can be written off at age sixteen.” Test scores and grades were especially suspect, wrote Healy, “[g]iven the multiple inequities that…riddle our secondary schools” (Healy, 1969, December).

Instead, Healy proposed a new model for institutional prestige, grounded in good teaching. Competition for “very bright” students was increasing, Healy admitted, now that “ignorance and bigotry” no longer left CUNY as the only available avenue for many of them. Ivy league schools now recruited “bright students with the same zeal and enticements” they had once used “to staff football teams.” As such, CUNY faced a real danger of losing these coveted students as “other options have opened to dazzle the eyes of any poor but bright city boy.”

But Healy argued that the way to compete for these students was not “ever tighter exclusionary admissions” but instead to offer “a superior teacher—along with the individual attention, individually tailored programs, accelerated schedules, and all the variety of learning and involvement that only a city university can offer.”

Healy directly cited SEEK as the answer to fears of black and Latino communities that Open Admissions “would swiftly degenerate into a revolving door for poorly prepared ghetto students.” He called SEEK “the proof that the University can understand the needs of these

27 Even as he echoed Berger’s arguments against the validity of admissions standards, Healy still slipped into conflating “very bright” students with highly credentialed ones.
students,… and that its people have both the skill and the patience to tailor each student’s program to the growth of his own capacities.” He promised CUNY would further expand SEEK to ensure the integration of the senior colleges. SEEK would serve the “major purpose” of preventing open admissions from sliding “into a two-track system…. [that] would in effect constitute a segregated system: the senior colleges would be almost totally white and the community colleges largely black.” And Healy cited one more critical contribution of SEEK to Open Admissions: “we have on hand a large body of counselors and faculty members who can serve as a cadre, as in-service-training personnel, for new faculty members, and as backstop for the senior colleges as they move into open admissions. Without SEEK the idea of open admissions would never have been born; without SEEK the operation could well fail.”

SEEK Builds A Critical Mass of Voices For Change

SEEK did more than offer CUNY a theoretical model for change; between Fall 1965 and Spring 1969, it brought about 4,000 students, 90% of them black or Latino, into CUNY—as well as dozens of black and Latino teachers, counselors and administrators. As of the Spring of 1969, over 3,000 of these SEEK students were still studying across CUNY (Berger 1969, October 21, p. 104). A small number of black students, many committed to the struggle for racial justice, had been admitted to City College under the traditional standards. Jane Tillman Irving, admitted to City College in 1965, recalls that: “I was much more interested in the Black struggle than the anti-war struggle or the women’s rights struggle—because racism was so overarching—it affected the lives of everyone I knew—that it transcended everything…” (Irving, 2016, July 24, p. 4). Paul Simms also entered City College as a regular premed student in 1965; Simms soon masterminded the hijacking of the engineering student newspaper, The Tech News, into The Paper, a powerful oppositional voice for change both at City College and in the world
(Covington, 2015, June 8, pp. 9-11; Irving, 2016, July 24, p. 3; Ford, D., 2016, July 17, p. 4; Ford, A., 2016, July 16, pp. 3-4).

But SEEK students multiplied these voices for change at CUNY; they added critical mass. Many (like Francee Covington and Eugenia Wiltshire) arrived at CUNY as already experienced, committed and sophisticated civil rights advocates (Covington, 2015, June 8, pp. 1-3; Wiltshire, 2015, November 20, pp. 3-4). For example, even though Simms led the birth of *The Paper*, he has agreed that it would not have been possible without help from SEEK students like Louis Rivera (Covington, 2015, June 8, p. 9). Francee Covington recalls that “with SEEK being on campus, there was a pool of people from which we could draw to work on *The Paper*. And then those people along with other people who [were] not in the SEEK program, could all come together and write about the issues that they thought were important” (Covington, 2015, June 8, p. 10). SEEK students joined their voices with these other voices for change. Supported by SEEK teachers and counselors, they soon advocated and agitated for fundamental change at CUNY (Ballard, 2011, pp. 221, 226-31; Irving, 2016, July 24, pp. 4-5; Reed, 2013; Biondi, 2011).


Beginning in 1966, SEEK received only single-year annual funding grants from Albany. As such, the existence of this already politically sensitive program was in constant jeopardy. SEEK needed sophisticated political guidance and for that guidance, Bowker turned to Julius C.C. Edelstein. Edelstein was born in Wisconsin in 1912. He attended the University of Wisconsin for seven years but never earned a degree. During World War II, Edelstein served as a naval ensign and aide to Admiral Leahy. After the war, Edelstein became an adviser to the President of the Philippines. From 1949 to 1960, he was an aide to Senator Herbert Lehman. He
was also a New York executive vice chairman for Kennedy’s 1960 campaign. From 1962 to 1965, Edelstein became an executive assistant to Mayor Wagner. In 1965 or 1966, Edelstein joined CUNY (“Julius Edelstein,” n.d.; Arenson, 2005, November 19). Edelstein knew nothing about college teaching and learning; but he was a remarkably well-connected and sophisticated political operative—and therefore an invaluable ally to the SEEK program.

In the Spring of 1967, SUNY administrators wanted to expand SEEK to SUNY. Bowker had just promoted Berger to be the University Dean in charge of SEEK, effective May 1, 1967 (Bowker, 1967, April 14; Ballard, 2011, p. 223). Berger at once began to actively assist SUNY to launch its version of SEEK. In practice, Berger now reported directly to Bowker (Berger, 1967, May 9, p. 14). Edelstein’s authority over SEEK was unclear, but he and other “SEEK associates” (likely including Berger) attended a two-hour April meeting with SUNY’s Vice Chancellor Harold Syrett where they explained the SEEK program and helped SUNY decide to launch SUNY SEEK at Buffalo.²⁸ Berger then attended a 19 person “SEEK orientation meeting for representatives from the State University and Buffalo community agencies” (likely including Edelstein) on May 4th (Berger, 1967, May 16). A few days later, Berger spoke to a conference of SUNY financial aid officers at a SUNY conference at Loch Sheldrake, New York where he explained CUNY’s SEEK program in detail. In answering questions, Berger said he had “been in conferences” with SUNY’s “administrative staff” including “your Vice-Chancellor” leading him to believe they were “quite determined and committed to go ahead with” SUNY’s SEEK program. (Berger, 1967, May 9, p. 14).

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²⁸ (Syrett, 1967, April 18). Syrett’s thank-you letter evidences Edelstein’s unusual role. Syrett thanked Edelstein rather than Berger. He called Edelstein “Professor” at a “Research Foundation of CUNY” (Syrett, 1967, April 18). Edelstein then forwarded Syrett’s letter to Berger, listing his own title as “Coordinator of Urban Studies” (Edelstein, 1967, April 19).
As Berger and Ballard would soon learn, CUNY’s central administration was the site of constant, complex political struggle. Ballard remembers Bowker as “a short, heavy, rumpled man who seemed always engaged in a mental chess game with those around him, be they opponents or allies” (2011, p. 226). The struggle over control of SEEK (and direct access to Bowker) would end in January of 1969 when Bowker named Edelstein as a Vice Chancellor and Berger’s boss (“8 posts,” 1969, January 29).

But in 1967, Edelstein and Berger worked together to export SEEK to SUNY. By July, the State had awarded a $500,000 New York State grant, secured by the newly elected Assemblyman Arthur Eve, to begin a SEEK SUNY Buffalo program in the Fall of 1967 (“Half Million,” 1967, July; CUNY, 2007; Ballard, 2014, p. 10). This SUNY SEEK program offered students “special courses, teachers and tutoring, free books, and modest financial support adjusted to minimum needs” (NYS Education Department, 1967, August, p. 14). The SUNY SEEK students were largely segregated in their first year, and then transferred to other SUNY campuses after they successfully completed their SEEK courses. “The tentative… program will include compensatory programs in reading, English and mathematics; enrichment programs in science and the social sciences; counseling on both a regular and ‘walk-in’ basis with students and their families; and academic counseling as an ongoing, year-round process” (NYS Education Department, 1967, August, pp. 14-15).

By the fall of 1967 Berger advised Edelstein that SUNY was asking for a second year SEEK budget of $2 million, expanding their program to 1,000 students (Berger, 1967, October 31). The next year, SUNY’s SEEK funding quadrupled to $1.97 million. Half was used to enroll 190 new SEEK students at Buffalo; the other half funded new programs administered by SUNY Albany, SUNY Cortland and SUNY Purchase (Gould, 1968, October 14). SUNY reported that
the Fall 1967 SEEK class at Buffalo College were 188 full-time and 61 part-time SEEK students (Gould, 1968, October 14). Of these, 92 students completed the program in one year and 89 of those 92 were matriculated at six SUNY campuses where they would continue to receive SEEK financial support. Another 97 students continued to study within the SEEK program (Gould 1968, October 14). Based on this report, the 1967 SUNY SEEK program had a one-year retention rate of 75% (186/249).

On May 28, 1969, Rockefeller signed into law a bill to “expand the SEEK program to all colleges and universities in the state” (“Rockefeller,” 1969, May 29). Within seven months, 57 New York SUNY and private colleges were operating desegregation programs under this new Higher Education Opportunity Law (NYS Education Department, 1970, January 1, pp. iii, 1). The primary objectives of HEOP echoed those of Berger and Ballard’s SEEK: to provide services for young people unable to attend college due to “educational and economic deprivation,” including screening for enrollment, diagnostic testing, motivational, guidance and general counseling, tutoring, instructional services and financial stipends.29

**SEEK’s Legacy Across Fifty Years**

From 1970 to 1975, SEEK continued to be “the principal means by which the senior colleges are integrated” (CUNY, 1976, February, p. 2:2). And SEEK remained a “backbone of the financial support which makes it possible for many of the poorest New Yorkers to receive a college education” (p. 2:2). By September of 1971, SEEK programs were operating at ten CUNY four-year colleges (p. 3:3). By February of 1975, there were over 10,400 SEEK students at

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29 (NYS Education Department, 1970, January 1, p. 2). However, some of these HEOP programs were merely token efforts. For example, in February 1969, Skidmore College, Union College, and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute announced “disadvantaged” student programs admitting only 25 students (Union), 20 students (Skidmore) and 20 students (RPI) per year. (“5 Upstate” 1969, February 28).
CUNY, and SEEK’s annual budget was $29.5 million. In ten years, SEEK had admitted about 20,000 students to CUNY and had graduated 1,700 students (p. 2:1).

In 1986, Edelstein argued that the “SEEK Program served as a model and prototype for [the New York] statewide… Higher Education Opportunity Program. That program is now established at each of the colleges of the State University and at many if not most of the private colleges. The SEEK Program at CUNY was its father and progenitor” (1986, p. 2). Fifty years after Ballard and Berger founded SEEK with 113 students at City College, CUNY’s SEEK programs continue to admit and support students across CUNY’s four-year colleges. SEEK programs (renamed EOP) have also continued across SUNY since 1967. Together, these programs have collectively assisted hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers to enter and succeed in four-year colleges. Ballard argues that SEEK’s example permanently changed the culture of all white colleges. Ballard believes “the lasting legacy of the program is that practically no college today, certainly no public institution… can exist without having some kind of intake program for minority students… who don’t meet their usual criteria” (Ballard 2014 p. 11). Moreover, Ballard believes now that SEEK “created a strong basis… for the creation of a strong,… black middle class in the City itself…. a lot of students came to those SEEK programs and have gone on to make good, viable lives for themselves and for their families…” (2014, p. 11).


31 As described above, it was reasonable for Edelstein to call CUNY SEEK the “father and progenitor” of the SUNY SEEK/EOP programs. In a sense, Edelstein could also fairly call SEEK a “progenitor” for HEOP programs at private colleges across New York, as the Governor labeled HEOP an expansion of SEEK. But additional research would be needed to gauge the extent to which CUNY SEEK was a direct model for any of those HEOP programs outside of SUNY.
And, of course, these large numbers should not obscure SEEK’s tremendous impact on individual students. Eugenia Wiltshire remembers that SEEK “got me into college, it got me a career and it got me one stellar friendship” (Wiltshire, 2015, November 20, p. 9). Marvina White recalls that “without the SEEK program, without these opportunities, and without the people and the structure that was in place there, I don’t know where I would be in my life…. that program launched me into the life I have now, my life” (White, 2015, January 27, p. 11). Francee Covington remembers that “SEEK was a tremendous blessing to me, to be able to be in a nurturing environment, discussing real topics, gaining marketable skills. SEEK gave me a platform, a foundation that I could build on and build a life for myself and my family” (Covington, 2015, June 8, p. 12).

And in May of 2016, fifty years after Covington, White and Wiltshire entered City College, another SEEK student, Orubba Almansouri, graduated as the City College 2016 Salutatorian. An immigrant from Yemen, Almansouri is a first generation college student who broke tribal and her own family’s taboos against women attending college; she majored in English literature and history and plans to pursue her doctorate tracing “the history of women’s contributions to and roles in literature, oral traditions and cultures of the Middle East” (CCNY, 2016, May 24, pp. 3-4). Almansouri spoke at SEEK’s forty-sixth annual awards ceremony for graduating seniors and honor students; ten days later, she delivered an impassioned salutatorian address in both English and Arabic at the City College commencement as Michelle Obama sat only a few feet away (Almansouri, 2016, June 3). After Almansouri’s speech, Obama hugged her. A few days later, Obama’s staff invited Almansouri to speak at the White House “United States of Women Summit” (CCNY, 2016, June 10).
In her commencement speech, Almansouri spoke about her struggles to prove to her family that she, as a woman, could attend college without sacrificing her identity, religion and traditions—and without ruining her family’s name. “I fought for the right to pursue an education, for the right to be here… We earned the right to be here.” She was proud that she “paved the road for generations of girls to follow in [her] footsteps” and that eleven of her female cousins have already enrolled in GED courses, graduated from high school or registered for colleges. She gave a shout-out to her SEEK peers, and thanked the SEEK faculty, as well as City College’s SEEK director Maudette Brownlee. Almansouri urged her fellow students to fight for sustained change, noting that even a single conversation “has the power to change a mind.” She spoke against those who would build walls or ban Muslims from America. And she urged the commencement visitors to linger around City College’s integrated campus and look around. “It is here that you will realize that we are an example of what the rest of America can look like” (Almansouri, 2016, June 3).
Chapter Seven

Volpe and Kriegel: Rhetoric and Writing at City College (1848-1968)

Born to European Jewish immigrants in 1933, Leonard Kriegel grew up in the Bronx where he went to P.S. 80 until the fifth grade. But then Kriegel contracted polio—a terrifying disease that struck its victims without warning, forced them into quarantined isolation, and then left them with varying degrees of permanent paralysis. Kriegel was hospitalized for two years; then, he was home-schooled through high school. But in September of 1951, Kriegel arrived on crutches at Hunter’s Bronx campus where his first college class was freshman composition (Kriegel, 1972, pp. 5-9).

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Eleven years older than Kriegel, Edmond Volpe grew up in New Haven, Connecticut. He graduated from James Hillhouse public high school and went out to Michigan to earn his bachelor’s degree in 1943. He joined the army and served in Panama during World War II. Then, Volpe moved to New York. After earning his masters and doctorate degrees at Columbia, he joined the City College faculty in 1954 (Platt, 2007, December 14; CCNY, 1965, p. 64).

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After Kriegel graduated from Hunter in 1955, he earned an M.A. in English literature at Columbia, and then a Ph.D. in American studies at N.Y.U. (Kriegel, 1972, pp. 61-62, 87, 100, 105-106; Bulletin 1965, p. 64). In 1960, he spent a year teaching at Long Island University (1972, pp. 105-06) A year later, Kriegel accepted a job as a tenure-track English instructor at City College, where from “1961 to 1964,… [his] primary task was to teach required courses to freshmen and sophomores” (1972, p. 128). In 1964, Kriegel received tenure, making him eligible
to vote in an election for a new English Chair. He then left on a year-long fellowship to lecture at Leiden University in the Netherlands (1972, pp. 149-153).

** Volpe won that 1964 election and became the Department’s Chair; that same year, he also published his book, a *Reader’s Guide to Faulkner*. And, in his tenth year in the English department, he also was promoted to associate professor (Platt, 2007, December 14; Volpe, 1965, May 1). Volpe would chair the English department for the next six years. **

** First Year Writing at City College (1961-1964) **

In his thoughtful 1972 teaching memoir, Kriegel described City’s four required English courses when he taught them between 1961 and 1964:

A year of freshman English, [English One and English Two] which attempted to teach the student to read and write with critical acumen, was followed by a year of sophomore literature, [English Three and English Four] essentially the same survey of English literature that I had taken at Hunter, except that we began with Chaucer rather than Beowulf and concluded with Yeats and Eliot rather than Hardy. To all intents and purposes, I was imposing the same literary structure on my students as had been imposed on me (p. 140).

Kriegel struggled to explain and defend the early 1960’s versions of English One and English Two—admitting that he was a poor advocate (p. 142). They “provided every student with a year’s practice in writing….The teacher’s difficulty here lay in discovering some mutual interest….We expected our students to ‘learn’ every kind of writing, from narration to letter writing” (pp. 142-143). The composition courses “centered around presenting different methods
and styles of writing to the class, but I suspect that my students gained much more from the personal conferences, where they could go over their papers in detail, than the classes themselves” (p. 144). Kriegel admitted that “freshman composition had changed very little since I had taken it as an undergraduate ten years earlier…. All I could give my students was certain elemental rules of clarity in writing…. I did not, I soon realized, really understand what anyone was supposed to be doing in freshman English” (pp. 144-145).

As Kriegel observed, writing pedagogy in 1964 at City College (as at many other American colleges) had changed very little for decades. And, as Kriegel admitted, his writing courses (like many other American writing courses) lacked any theoretical grounding or clear pedagogical purpose beyond teaching elemental rules and clarity.

But rhetoric and writing instruction at City College had once been very different.

**Broad and Deep Rhetoric and Writing Instruction at City College (1848 - 1901)**

John Brereton and Sharon Crowley both trace collegiate first-year writing courses to Harvard’s two-semester English A, the course which was developed for sophomores after Harvard administered its first admissions writing exam in 1873, and was taught to first-year students beginning in 1885 (Brereton, 1995, pp. 8-11; Crowley, 1998, pp. 65-68). But Brereton also observes that there was “extensive instruction in rhetoric and writing at Harvard and elsewhere” before Harvard’s English A. Rather than limit writing instruction to one or two courses, these earlier writing programs “required a mix of oral and written composition throughout all four years of college, with a single rhetoric course to provide a theoretical grounding in the principles of effective prose…”(1995, p. 9).

City College was founded in 1848 and course catalogues from 1851 through the 1890s were divided into four regular college years plus a fifth preparatory year. From the 1850s to the
1870s, regular “Oratory and Composition” exercises were required for students in all five years (CCNY, 1851, September, pp. 23-27; CCNY, 1861, pp. 24-27; CCNY, 1872, pp. 26-29). The 1856 Catalogue specified that exercises “in declamation and composition are required once a month from each student. The students of the Junior and Senior classes are exercised in forensic discussion and original declamation, with reading and criticism of standard English authors” (p. 41).

Until at least 1901, City College students were required to produce periodic oral and/or written compositions in all four of their regular college years—and often during the preparatory year as well. In 1881, the preparatory students and first-year college students composed only in writing. The sophomores completed both “oratory and composition.” The juniors and seniors composed only oral, “original declamations” (CCNY, 1881, pp. 16-19.) The terms “declamation” and “oratory” suggest all these exercises were modeled (at least in principle) on argument and persuasion forms dating back to ancient Roman and Greek rhetorical studies—forms that practiced logical arguments as well as persuasive appeals to emotions and values. All City College college-level students followed this same model in 1891—although compositions were not required from the preparatory year students. (CCNY, 1891, pp. 13-15). In 1901, all college-level students were still required to write essays in conjunction with three years of required and one year of elective English courses. In addition:

Every Senior and Junior must write an original oration. Those pieces which are found to be sufficiently meritorious are rehearsed with the Instructor in Elocution and spoken in the college chapel before the students and the faculty. Every Sophomore must rehearse with the Instructor of Elocution and deliver before the students one selected declamation (CCNY, 1901, pp. 19-21).
In sum, during City’s first fifty years of existence, oral and written composing, rehearsing and public performing was a central component of City’s curriculum for every student throughout their entire four years. Pieces were composed over time, rehearsed, and then performed for the college community.

**Grammar, Logic and Rhetoric Instruction at City College (1848 - 1901)**

During its first fifty years, in addition to these broad composing, rehearsing and performing exercises, City College also required largely fixed courses of study that included separate grammar, rhetoric and logic courses. The 1851 preparatory year courses included Latin grammar, French grammar, English verbs, as well as spelling and pronunciation. First-year college students studied more Latin grammar and French grammar; but they also studied rhetoric. As sophomores, they continued rhetoric, as they began to study Greek grammar. As juniors, students began Latin composition and continued Greek grammar. As seniors, they began Spanish grammar, continued Latin composition and studied George Frederick Graham’s *English Synonyms Classified and Explained with Practical Exercises* (CCNY, 1851, September, pp. 23-27; Connors, 1997, p. 220).

In 1852, several English literature courses appeared; rhetoric remained a sophomore course; synonyms moved to sophomore year; and logic and forensic discussions appeared as separate junior courses (CCNY, 1852, September, pp. 28-30). In 1853 and 1854, an English “General Grammar” course in the first session of the preparatory year was followed by rhetoric; a second semester of rhetoric continued as a first-year college-level course. The synonyms course moved to sophomore year; logic remained a junior course (CCNY, 1853, September, p. 28; 1854, September). In 1855, rhetoric moved to two semesters in the first year; synonyms and logic were sophomore courses where they stayed in 1856 and 1861 (CCNY, 1855, September,
pp. 34-35; 1856, September, pp. 38-39; CCNY, 1861, pp. 24-25). In 1871, rhetoric was a two-semester, sophomore level course, with separate sophomore and junior courses in logic (CCNY, 1872, pp. 26-28). In 1881, rhetoric remained a two-semester sophomore course, with logic in both sophomore and senior years (CCNY, 1881, pp. 16-19). In 1891, rhetoric and logic were both two-semester sophomore classes (CCNY, 1891, pp. 14-15).

From the onset, there was a tension as to whether grammar was a college-level subject. In its early years, City College students were admitted through qualifying examinations in “Spelling, Reading, Writing, English Grammar, Geography, Arithmetic, Elementary Book-keeping, History of the United States, and Algebra…” (CCNY, 1856, September). But although knowledge of grammar was a prerequisite for admission, it was always the subject of substantial study within the College as well. Foreign language grammar courses were scattered across all years of study. English grammar courses often appeared in the preparatory year, but reemerged in college-year courses as well. From these earliest years then, City College faculty struggled to reconcile their elitist beliefs that grammar was a preparatory subject with their frustrations that their students had not mastered more of it.

For example, Graham’s Synonyms, taught as a senior course in 1851 and a sophomore course in later years, was in substantial part an advanced grammar textbook; it taught students to parse between similar words while reinforcing grammatical concepts, beginning with epithet and adjective: “Every adjective is an epithet; but every epithet is not an adjective…. In prose composition, the epithet is frequently placed after the noun….An epithet qualifies distinctively, an adjective qualifies generally” (1846, p. 31). There were short exercises: “A word added to a noun, to signify the addition or separation of some quality, or manner of being, such as good, bad, & c., is an __________” (1846, p. 32). The synonyms course taught diction (word choice)
and grammar. Eventually renamed as “Grammar and Diction,” it would survive in similar form until at least 1930 (CCNY, 1930, p. 222) and then gradually evolve into “Diction and Structure: Advanced exposition” (CCNY, 1943, June 1, p. 31), and “Advanced Composition” (CCNY, 1955, September 1, p. 50).

**Deep Rhetoric and Logic Instruction (1848 – 1911)**

In the early City College catalogues, textbooks are sometimes listed and they suggest deep instruction in rich and sometimes conflicting rhetorical theories. Berlin credits the late 18th and early 19th 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 19th Century (Berlin, 1984, pp. 19, 34). The influence of Campbell and Blair is visible in the early City College rhetoric courses. City College students studied Whately directly in their logic classes. The 1851 rhetoric text was the widely popular Samuel P. Newman’s *A Practical System of Rhetoric* (CCNY, 1855, September, pp. 25-26; Connors, 1997, p. 220). Berlin and Connors both see Newman as an early imitator who borrowed heavily from both Campbell and Blair, especially Blair’s focus on stylistic study of good literature, broadly meaning non-fiction, fiction and poetry (Berlin, 1984, pp. 25, 35-38; Connors, 1997, p. 220). “Nearly the whole of Newman is taken up with questions of literary excellence and stylistic quality” (Connors, 1997, p. 264). But if Newman’s text pressed early City College students to study literary styles to improve their writing, his stylistic rhetoric was balanced by their study of Whately’s more Aristotelian rhetoric in their logic classes.\(^\text{32}\) And Newman was soon replaced by Henry Day’s *Elements of the Arts of Rhetoric*; Day was critical of

\(^\text{32}\) (CCNY, 1855, September, p. 35; Register, 1861, p. 25) This text could have been Whately’s 1828 *Elements of Rhetoric* or his 1827 *Elements of Logic*—which seems more logical for a logic class.
stylistic rhetoric (Catalogue, 1855, September, p. 35; Connors, 277, pp. 266). As the textbooks changed and were used in different combinations in rhetoric and logic courses, they offered a deep theoretical grounding for the frequent rhetorical written and oral exercises composed and performed by all students.

Changes to New York State laws and regulations in 1896 induced City College to convert its single preparatory year into the separate Townsend Harris High School (Soliday, 2002, p. 30). Starting in 1900, students could be admitted to City College by passing a qualifying exam or with a high school diploma (Renfro and Amour-Garb, 1999, June, p. 14). City College catalogues now began to list a four-year college program. In 1901, first-year students studied English literature. Rhetoric remained a sophomore course, now described in more detail as having a combined stylistic/argumentative emphasis: “The historical development of English prose will be considered; then the style of the best modern writers will be analyzed; and finally attention will be given to argumentative composition and the construction of briefs.” Textbooks included John Franklin Genung’s “Rhetoric and Handbook of Rhetorical Analysis, ” and George P. Baker’s The Principles of Argumentation (Register, 1901, pp. 19-21).

Genung’s The Working Principles of Rhetoric heavily emphasized stylistic rhetoric but was comprehensive; Part I covered style (1901, pp. 16-388); Part II covered invention (pp. 389-662), including chapters on description, narration, exposition and argumentation. The argument chapter at the end of the book (pp. 597-662) included sections on evidence, inductive and deductive reasoning and counterarguments. Genung noted that argument was a more sophisticated subject than the “study of literary types” and “various ways of exhibiting material” covered in the rest of the book. “To the mere exhibiting of thought, therefore, must be added some process of establishing or enforcing it as truth, as something on which conviction and
conduct may be based. Hence the need for argumentation” (p. 597). Genung’s *Handbook of Rhetorical Analysis* was a non-fiction prose reader, with readings grouped to correspond to the style and invention parts of his *Working Principles* (1890, pp. iii, iv). Genung explained that these readings were “simply… extracts to be analyzed, in style and structure, for the purpose of forming, from actual examples, some intelligent conception of what the making of good literature involves…” (1890, p. v).

In 1911, a separate logic course had disappeared, but it was now covered briefly in Genung’s *Principles* and more thoroughly in Baker’s examination of rhetorical appeals, evidence, and logic. Baker called logical appeals “conviction” and ethical/pathetic appeals “persuasion,” with the most powerful arguments resulting from a combination of both approaches (1898, pp. 5-7). “He who appeals to the intellect only—simply tries to convince, leaving the feelings, the emotions, untouched—runs the risk (1) of being dull and dry, for his work will lack warmth and color; and (2) of failing to produce any action on the part of the hearer of reader, for accepting a belief as true does not always mean to act promptly or steadily on that idea” (Baker, 1898, p. 5). Baker’s *Argumentation* was an exceptional success (Connors, 1997, pp. 232-33). But it resisted the larger reductive trend in college rhetoric texts and courses after the 1880s towards more stylistic and formalist versions of rhetoric.

**Reducing the Breadth and Depth of Rhetoric and Writing Instruction (1911-1921)**

Rhetoric and writing instruction within American college English departments was reduced between 1875 and 1925 (and at City College between 1902 and 1920) in two critical ways. First, broad oral and written composing, rehearsing and performing exercises were reduced to written composing, and limited to study in only one or two composition courses. (Oral composing and performing did not always disappear; as at City College, it often moved to
new speech departments.) Second, complex rhetorical constructs of composing were also reduced as rhetoric, gradually renamed composition, increasingly focused completely on style and grammar within the simpler writing “modes” that merely narrated, explained or described. Connors observes that once grammar and rhetoric courses were combined into written composition, college “rhetorics” soon focused on merely the lower-order stylistic elements of rhetoric and then increasingly on sentence mechanics (1997, pp. 124-130). “By 1885 or so, a large part of the nature of freshman and sophomore writing courses was defined by error avoidance rather than by any sort of communicative success” (Connors, 1997, p. 130). In Berlin’s view, by 1900 “the typical composition textbook was devoted to the forms of discourse, stylistic matters... and discussions of usage and grammar. Superficial correctness had become the most significant measure of accomplished prose” (1984, p. 73). Over time, college rhetoric devolved into composing style and style devolved into correct grammar.

A.S. Hill’s Harvard English A course inspired both these devolutions toward narrow and shallow writing instruction at American colleges. The devolution toward shallowness is traceable in Hill’s own rhetoric textbooks. In his 1878 *The Principles of Rhetoric and Their Application*, Hill recognized that he was combining elements of grammar, logic and rhetoric. Hill argued for the importance of grammatical correctness/purity as “the first requisite of discourse, whether spoken or written” (p. 2). But he also recognized that accurate usage was, in fact, extremely rare both in “English and American society,” and in the entire history of English literature (p. 2). In Part I, Hill covered “grammatical purity” and word choices (pp. 1-166). In part II, Hill considered three “kinds” of composition, giving brief attention to narrative and exposition (pp. 167-83) before turning in some depth to logic and direct argument (pp. 184-247). But fourteen years later, in his 1892 *The Foundations of Rhetoric*, Hill devoted virtually all of the book’s 360
pages to grammar, punctuation, parts of speech, capitalization, sentence-level correctness, clarity, force, ease and unity. Even Hill’s candid 1878 recognition that grammatical errors were universal was replaced by his 1892 one-sentence introduction: “Every English-speaking person should know the general terms and the leading facts of English grammar” (1892, p. 1). In this 1892 “rhetoric” text, Hill devoted only twenty pages to move beyond sentence formalism, briefly touching on the forms and sequencing of paragraphs (1892, pp. 320-325).

City College resisted these reductive trends until after the turn of the century. But, in 1911, a separate speech course requirement had moved outside the English department; English faculty taught only written composing. City College students were required to take three years of English courses. In their first year, they studied two semesters of English literature, in which they wrote essays that were “corrected in personal conference with the instructors.” As sophomores, students took one semester only of rhetoric, now described as “Theme and plan, kinds of composition—particularly argumentation—paragraph, sentence and diction. Frequent exercises, briefs and essays are required, some written work being done at least once a week.” The texts were Hammond Lamont’s English Composition and Genung’s Handbook. Sophomores also were required to take the “Grammar and Diction” course, descended from the 1851 synonyms course. Juniors were required to take two semesters of Shakespeare (CCNY, 1911, pp. 30-31, 45-46).

These 1911 courses mark three important reductions in the breadth and depth of rhetoric and writing instruction. First, the English department no longer specifically required composing and personal conferences in all four years of college—but only in three individual courses. Second, oral composing and performing were now outside the English department. Third, even the rhetoric courses were reduced in breadth and depth. Rhetoric was a single semester course,
paired with a grammar and word choice course. Baker’s *Argumentation* text was now eliminated—effectively ending any significant coverage of logical reasoning.

By 1920, the reduction of rhetoric to style and grammar was complete. English One “Rhetoric” and English Two “Rhetoric” were first-year, two-credit, required courses; this new structure would remain unchanged until 1965. Although two semesters of rhetoric had been part of City College’s curriculum throughout almost its entire history, these two courses were rhetorical in name only. The 1920 Register described English One in this way:

Paragraph and essay writing. 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, December, p. 94).

This overt emphasis on grammar and spelling correctness was reinforced by the only listed text, Edwin C. Woolley’s *Handbook of Composition*, a book Connors describes as “the first clearly discernible handbook of mechanical correctness” (CCNY, 1920, December, p. 94; Connors, 1997, p. 91).

The 1920 English Two course description contained another warning to students. “A continuation of Course 1, with more stress upon the larger forms of composition, and practical methods of self-expression. This is the last prescribed composition course in the College, and credit for it will not be given until a student has learned to express himself in writing with both ease and accuracy” (1920, p. 94). Together with English Three, a single four-hour sophomore literature course, English One and Two were the only required English courses (CCNY, 1920, December, pp. 39-40).
Remedial Writing is Added to the Required English Courses (1930)

Another significant curricular reorganization appeared in the City College 1930 Register. English One and Two retained their structure, but were renamed as “Composition” courses and given less threatening descriptions. The aim of English One was stated simply as “improvement in force and interest, chiefly through practice in narrative and description…” (p. 222). English Two was described as the “writing of essays embodying independent thought” (p. 222). The sophomore literature requirement course had expanded to two semesters of three-credit courses, English Three and English Four; they were together described simply as a “survey course on English writers” (p. 222). But there were two new writing courses. The zero-credit English Five covered the “mechanics of correct writing.” It 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.” The one-credit English Six was prescribed “for students in the upper classes who are still weak in the technique of writing English” (p. 222).

Composition as Grammar (1930-1963)

Although the English Department would tweak them over the next 35 years, these six required English courses would remain in place until 1965. English Six (sometimes renumbered “F1”) was expressly aimed at “foreign students who have some command of English” (CCNY, 1946, June 1, p. 36). It became an Evening Division Course (CCNY, 1964, p. 78), where it gradually expanded to a two-semester, “(1) Basic; (2) Advanced” course sequence (CCNY, 1955, September, p. 62) and then a three semester, “(1) Basic; (2) Intermediate; (3) Advanced” course sequence (CCNY, 1961, p. 83). The Day Division experimented briefly with an added zero-credit “X1” course, “Pre-Collegiate English” that provided “training in oral English composition and literature equivalent to that included in the last year of English in high school”
(CCNY, 1946, June 1, p. 36). The Evening Division also experimented with a “combined” English One and English Five course that met six hours a week (CCNY, 1961, p. 83).

But even after the English department added the punitive zero-credit, “mechanics of correct writing” English Five course (sometimes renamed “0.1. Remedial English”), English One was often described for two decades in just seven words: “stresses correctness in grammar, diction, and structure” (CCNY, 1945, June 1, p. 35; CCNY, 1955, September 1, p. 50; CCNY, 1961, p. 83; CCNY, 1964, p. 78). As suggested by this course description, English faculty continued to teach a lot of grammar in English One and they were unhappy about it. In 1953, Chairman Edgar Johnson expanded the English Five sections and urged all instructors to “check up on their students’ work, especially at the beginning of each term, and assign them to [English Five] if it seems needed” (1953, April 9, p. 2). Some English One instructors demoted students from English One to English Five after “two to three weeks,” once “their needs [were] detected.” And the faculty also began to work on placement exams so that students could be “debarred from English [One] until they have repaired mechanical deficiencies by immediate assignment to English [Five]” (Johnson, 1956, April 5, p. 2). In 1963, led by assistant professor Frederick Karl, the English faculty complained to City school officials and the New York Times that “up to 25 per cent of entering freshmen were too backward in spelling and grammar for the opening course in composition” and they threatened stiffer placement exams to push more students into English Five (“City College,” 1963, May 3).

A New Grammar Drills Workbook For English One (1962)

After error-avoidance became a central concern of college writing pedagogy in the 1880s, Connors notes that the rise of mechanics handbooks was quickly followed in the mid-1920s by the emergence of “their dark siblings, drill books and workbooks that introduced completely a-
rhetorical practice in error recognition and sentence construction” into college writing courses (1997, pp. 148-49). Direct grammar instruction was soon recognized as a failed and even harmful approach. An influential NCTE 1963 meta-study of composition research cited “study after study” that had concluded that “instruction in formal grammar has little or no effect on the quality of student composition” (Braddock, 1963, p. 37). For example, the NCTE cited a 1945 dissertation study of 831 middle-schoolers that found teaching formal grammar improved their grammar test scores but either failed to reduce or actually increased the errors in their real writing (p. 37, 122). In all, the 1963 NCTE meta-study concluded that in “view of the widespread agreement of research studies based upon many types of students and teachers, the conclusion can be stated in strong and unqualified terms: the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing” (pp. 37-38).

In 1962, some English faculty added a new “programmed” grammar workbook to English One: Joseph Blumenthal’s 1962 English 3200: A Programmed Course in Grammar and Usage (CCNY, 1964, October 3, p. 2; CCNY, 1965, February 1). Its 535 pages contained over 1600 individual sentence mechanics questions, each in its own atomized, context-less, individual box. The 1600 answers were provided in more boxes that were always two pages away. English 3200’s twelve units covered all aspects of formal sentence mechanics. Some questions asked students to identify and correct mistakes. Some asked them to select correct choices. Many asked grammar theory questions. For example, the book’s very first question asked students to distinguish between an adjective phrase and an adverb phrase in a sample sentence (Blumenthal, 1962, p. 1). Some of the question boxes also contained short statements of grammar rules: “Besides being formed from a verb, a present participle resembles a verb in another way: it may
take a direct object or a subject complement, as no ordinary adjective can do” (p. 515). Nothing in the 535-page workbook moved beyond sentence mechanics. But the book’s 3200 boxes of questions and answers enabled Blumenthal to claim the book could “program” students to learn mechanics using instant positive reinforcement—a pedagogical innovation that he modestly hailed “as the greatest advance in education since the invention of movable type in the eleventh century” (p. iii).

Perhaps English 3200’s more important feature was that it was designed for self-learning. By the Fall of 1964, some City College teachers “remarked that the use of English 3200 freed the teacher for more work in composition and literature” (CCNY, 1964, October 3, p. 2). In 1965, the department reported their “innovation” to the faculty council, noting that English One students who used the workbook soon scored higher on grammar questions in the departmental final exam—allowing instructors to spend less class time teaching grammar and avoid repeating “remedial… content (e.g. grammatical principles, theme assignments) material already covered in high school” (CCNY, 1965, February 1, p. 1).

Abolishing One-Half of First Year Writing (1964-1965)

In 1964, a City College curriculum reorganization enabled the English Department (under its new chairman Volpe) to reduce teaching loads from four to three courses per semester (CCNY, 1964, October 3) and from four to three days per week (CCNY, 1964, November 5, p. 2). They accomplished this work reduction by abolishing English Two (CCNY, 1964, October 3; CCNY, 1966, p. 63; Soliday, 2002, p. 53). To justify eliminating half of the required writing courses, the English faculty beefed up English One from a two hour/two credit to a three hour/four credit course, and added writing assignments to English Three and Four (CCNY, 1965, February 1, p. 1). The two-credit English One and English Two now merged into a single, four-
credit English One course, described officially as an “intensive course in writing, extending from a review of basic grammatical principles to an introduction to the research paper. It stresses written composition in the essay form. The teaching of writing is coordinated with the course readings, which offer an introduction to the reading of literature. Frequent conferences required. 3 hrs. wk.; 4 cr.” (CCNY, 1965, p. 67).

Mary Soliday has noted that reducing composition courses both enabled English professors to reduce their teaching loads and to teach more literature elective courses to juniors and seniors (Soliday, 2002, pp. 53-56). Volpe predicted that reducing the writing courses “will permit us to teach— with fewer composition students and fewer themes to grade—more effectively than we did in the past” (1965, May 1, p. 1). These changes served the department’s (and the college’s) ambitions to be seen as a research rather than a teaching institution. To Volpe, the “result of this curriculum change on our teaching load symbolizes the College’s recognition that an overburdened teacher lacks the time and energy to devote himself to the scholarly pursuits essential for a faculty involved in graduate education (1965, May 1, p. 1).

Redesigning English One (October, 1964)

On October 3, 1964, an ad hoc committee of assistant professors Richard Goldstone, John Hintz, and James Mirollo submitted a planning memo and a draft departmental syllabus for the new, single-semester composition course. Recognizing the hard work required to teach writing, they proposed that instructors receive six hours of teaching credit for the new three-hour, four credit English One. The draft course syllabus (really a one-page teacher’s manual) stated that

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33 (CCNY, 1964, October 3). Kriegel had quickly learned as an NYU student-teacher that “freshman English [was] probably the most time-consuming and difficult of all courses taught in the freshman year of college” (1972, p. 65). Teaching two writing sections “meant that I had to correct about forty-five themes per week, hold weekly conferences with students about their writing, and attend weekly meetings at which the problems of teaching freshmen to write were discussed at length, not
English One would have a “twofold purpose.” In one of the class hours and in all student conferences, instructors were expected to address “the study of rhetoric and matters relating directly to the student’s writing.” In the other two class hours each week, they would address the “study of the forms of literature (the essay, fiction, poetry, and drama)....” The proposed textbooks were Alton Morris’s 1964 *College English: the First Year*, paired with the *English 3200* grammar workbook.

Sections would have 22 to 25 students. Students would normally write “ten short papers and a longer research paper,” such that an instructor would read “the equivalent of 300 papers for a single course.” While these papers:

- may include the usual autobiographical class theme, descriptive and expository essays,
- exercises in paragraph development, analysis and argumentation, and a research paper, it is desirable—wherever possible—to relate the student’s writing to his reading. The analytic themes, thus, might deal with a story, poem or play; the research paper might deal with a literary problem or with a writer (CCNY, 1964, October 3).

**A New Focus on Enforcing Grammar Instruction (1964)**

Having reduced the writing requirement to a single semester, some faculty members “suggested increased use” of the zero-credit English Five mechanics course (Minutes, 1964, October 3, p. 2). In addition, assistant professor Stephen Merton moved that a student who received less than a C in English [One] be required to take an additional course in composition. The motion was defeated. Several other speakers urged that either a more rigorous final examination in composition or some

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*to mention prepping and delivering my classroom lectures” (1972, p. 65). (Kriegel did not mention any similar writing instructor meetings at City College, except within SEEK (1972, p. 173).)*
other means be adopted to insure that no student be graduated from City College who cannot write correctly (p. 2).

The English faculty had always cared about grammar. But their anxieties about enforcing sentence correctness were beginning to take powerful new forms beginning in late 1964—just as it was becoming clear that more diverse students would soon enter the college through expanded admissions, community college transfers, and direct desegregation programs like those that had just launched at Brooklyn and CUNY’s community colleges. These new anxieties and enforcement proposals paralleled the new anxieties and barriers being proposed in the Faculty Council at the same time.

A Prescribed English One Text Grounded in 19th Century Pedagogies (1964)

Brereton observes that Harvard’s model always had critics; he traces several alternative 19th Century writing course models, two of which gained prominence. By 1870, Yale developed a writing about literature approach which was soon widely copied and adapted. By 1900, another model conducted close analysis of non-fiction essays, focusing on ideas rather than their literary style or rhetorical effect (Brereton, 1995, p. 16). By 1928, a nationwide survey found that first year composition courses were universal at American colleges and they commonly used some combination of rhetorics, readers and grammar/usage handbooks (Taylor, 1929, pp. 546-551). However, older and more selective Eastern colleges were less likely to use rhetorics; instead, they often combined their first year composition courses with introductions to literature (Taylor, 1929, pp. 551-552).

The 1964 proposed City College English One textbook, College English: The First Year, divided its 943 pages among essays, literature, stylistic rhetoric, and grammar models. First published in 1941, (and presumably in use by 1964 by at least those City College teachers who
proposed it as a prescribed text) the bulk (684 pages) was a reader that began with eight idea-themed groups of essays (horizon, language, learning, the mass media, the impact of science, the human equation, the arts, and literature) (Morris, 1964, pp. 4-268) and then turned to literature with readings in biography, the short story, drama and poetry (pp. 269-689).

An abbreviated stylistic rhetoric section (pp. 707-740) explained the fundamentals of speaking and listening (pp. 690-707), sentence style (pp. 734-740), and the writing modes of exposition (pp. 707-713), argument (pp. 714-20), description (pp. 720-26), and narration (pp. 726-33). A short teacher’s guide section suggested twenty theme assignments (pp. 741-762) including only one argument essay (pp. 751-52). *College English* concluded with an exhaustive mechanics handbook (pp. 763-940).

**A Revised Departmental Syllabus for English One (March 18, 1965)**

In March of 1965, the department approved a new departmental English One syllabus, drafted by the composition committee and presented by assistant professor Irwin Stark.\(^4\) This “syllabus” was again a short instructor’s manual. It specified that the two aims of English One were: 1) to stress expository writing, extending “from a review of basic grammatical principles to an introduction to the research paper” and 2) to “offer an introduction to the reading of literature” (CCNY, 1965, March 18, p. 1). There were now ten total required themes including the research paper, instead of eleven.

Soliday has observed that this 1965 syllabus warned that students should teach themselves grammar, syntax, usage, punctuation and spelling through self-study (2002, p. 56). Indeed, the syllabus again prescribed the *English 3200* workbook and proposed that “[n]ormally the instructor will not discuss these areas in class unless special difficulties prompt him to do so”

\(^4\) The minutes specify that some handwritten changes were made to the approved version (1965, March 18). However, these changes do not appear on surviving version of the proposal.
(CCNY, 1965, March 18). But despite this aspiration, the syllabus left little doubt that mechanics were now in fact the required central focus of both classwork and conferences. It specifically suggested periodic grammar tests using English 3200 as a way to prepare students for the grammar questions on the departmental final exam (p. 1). Literature study was reduced to half or less of class time. Instead, half or more of class time was designated for “paragraph development, effective organization, logical development of ideas, sentence variety, diction, levels of appropriate usage, style, tone, footnoting, the presentation of bibliographical and statistical data and other matters as the instructor deems relevant, e.g., semantics, logic, argumentation and the use of the dictionary” (p. 1). And, “at least two” writing themes were required to be “extemporaneous” (p. 1).

These in-class writing assignments were not new. The grammar-centric 1920 Register version of English One required all “writing [to be] done in class without home preparation” (1920, December, p. 94). But all such timed, single-draft writing assignments were essentially one to five paragraph grammar quizzes. As such, this 1965 in-class theme requirement further enforced an error-centric emphasis. Finally, instructors were required to “correct” every submitted paper and to meet seven times with each student “to discuss the student’s themes and answer questions about grammar” (p. 1).35

In a temporary victory for writing instructors, the department rejected a composition committee proposal to automatically give “incomplete” grades to any student who failed the multiple-choice grammar section of the departmental final exam and to require those students to register for English Five or pass another grammar exam (CCNY, 1965, March 18, p. 2). During

35 The March 1965 syllabus no longer required College English: the First Year. The Composition Committee soon submitted instead “a list of recommended texts” (CCNY, 1965, April 1, p. 2).
“widespread debate” on this question, some faculty questioned not only the specific proposal, but the larger assumption that “objective grammar tests” could validly measure “writing ability” (p. 2). For the moment, writing course teachers retained their traditional authority over course grades, which they could base “on student themes, quizzes, larger exams, the final exam and other factors the instructor considers pertinent. The instructor is the sole judge of the weight to be assigned to each of these factors” (p. 1).

**Creating a High-Stakes Final Exam and Proposing Other Barriers (April 1, 1965)**

But on April 1, 1965—less than two weeks after approving the new English One syllabus and rejecting a high-stakes grammar final exam—the English department met again and resumed its debate about enforcing sentence correctness. At this same time, Gallagher and Davis were now pressing hard for faculty approval to launch a new desegregation program at City based on Ballard, Berger and Levy’s proposals. One week later, on April 8, 1965, the faculty senate would approve the pilot program proposal. Within weeks, Berger, Ballard and Sohmer would begin publically recruiting the first 113 SEEK students to begin their studies in September.

In the April English meeting, there was a renewed sense of urgency about enforcing sentence correctness. Volpe reported that an engineering school dean had requested a new “test to measure the effectiveness of [the] new English 1” (CCNY, 1965, April 1, p. 1). Associate professor Andrew Lavender then proposed a new college-wide “proctored four-hour exam in composition…as a prerequisite for graduation.”36 The department did not act on those ideas just yet.

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36 (CCNY, 1965, April 1, p. 2). Lavender was a 1936 City College graduate (CCNY, 1965, p. 63). He was based at Baruch and would become the first English chair there in 1968 when Baruch separated from City College (Volpe, 1968, p. 1). Baruch would be among the last senior colleges to launch a SEEK program; they began a small program with 31 SEEK transfer students in September 1968 and a single part-time instructor in “English literature.” Only in September
The English faculty had rejected a high stakes English One grammar exam only two weeks earlier—electing instead to retain full instructor authority over course grades, and doubting that objective exams questions could fairly measure writing ability. But Volpe steered them back to revisit the issue. Stark reported that he had conducted an “inconclusive” poll of the faculty about “the English [One] grammar examination” (p. 1). Nonetheless, professor Edward Mack, at Volpe’s suggestion, now moved a “new scheme.” Mack proposed that students who scored less than 60% on the grammar section of the English One final would automatically fail the course on a temporary basis. They would have a year to pass another grammar exam or the F would be permanent. In the interim, they would be blocked from English Three and Four and some other courses. Mack’s motion passed with only one negative vote (p. 1). After additional discussion, the Department also voted for a new requirement that English Five students score 50% or more on the grammar section of the final exam or automatically fail that course as well (p. 2).

“The Danger of Allowing Standards to Slip” (1965 to 1966)

A month after steering the department to adopt new high-stakes grammar exams for English One and English Five students, Volpe worried that changes in City College enrollments portended “serious problems.” He recognized as “commendable… the concept of providing free higher education” to “economically and culturally underprivileged groups…” (1965, May 1, p. 2). But Volpe argued that this expanded access “clashes brutally with the equally commendable desire to maintain City College’s traditional, high academic standards” (p. 2). And Volpe made his personal biases clear. “The academic future of the college will depend, I think, upon the individual teacher’s insistence upon high standards…. Because we are so accustomed to take for

1969 did Baruch accept a class of 155 SEEK first-year students and begin any significant desegregation (Berger, 1969, October 21, pp. 32-33).
granted the intellectual caliber of the student body, we must be particularly alert to the dangers of allowing standards to slip” (p. 2).

Volpe reaffirmed his personal elitism in a 1966 report to his department about the faculty council’s refusal to classify English Three and Four as writing courses. “I don’t want to be the chairman, or even a member, of a second rate department in a second rate college” (Volpe, 1966, April, pp. 4-5). But doubts were creeping in. “I think we ought to face the fact that we are not as good as we think we are, just as the College is not as good as it thinks it is” (p. 5). And Volpe still embraced the department’s traditional teaching mission. “We have in this department the teacher-scholars to provide the best possible education in writing and literature, and I think that we can” (p. 5). The way to remain a first-rate department, in Volpe’s eyes, was to “produce new ideas, [and] keep our curriculum and our teaching methods under constant, highly critical surveillance…” (p. 5).


In May 1966, lecturer Alice Gaskell made a “plea for a more ‘rational’ attitude toward the Composition Final— instructors should have freedom to weigh [grammar questions] according to their own beliefs…” (CCNY, 1966, May 12). In 1966, Gaskell could only plead; English department voting was limited to tenured members and some untenured assistant professors; she had no standing to move or vote herself (CCNY, 1966, December 1, p. 1). Her plea led assistant professor Ted Gross (who had standing) to move to allow instructors to weigh the final as “they think appropriate.” But Gaskell and Gross were outmaneuvered; Professor Frederick Shipley moved to delay Gaskell’s request for a year and the professors approved this delay by 11 to 8 (CCNY, 1966, May 12).
Almost a year later, assistant professor Alice Chandler, now the department’s composition committee chair, asked again to end the “rigid rule of 60 as a passing grade.” The department agreed to a one-semester suspension of the high-stakes grammar test; instructors were again free to use their discretion; but they were required to report any curved grades to Chandler’s committee (1967, March 2, p. 2).

**The Departmental Final Exam for English Five and English One (Spring, 1967)**

A surviving Spring 1967 departmental exam covered both English Five and English One. Chandler described this exam as asking the same grammar questions as prior exams “although in a different form, and [adding] questions on spelling and some rhetorical terms…” (CCNY, 1967, March 2, p. 2). Part I required all English Five and English One students to identify the errors in 35 sentences. This part, according to Chandler, was drawn directly from the *English 3200* grammar workbook (CCNY, 1966, December 1, p. 2). Part II asked fifteen multiple-choice grammar theory questions. The Part II version for English Five students asked them to: 1) distinguish between fragments, comma splices, dangling modifiers, faulty parallelism and faulty pronoun references; 2) distinguish between incorrect subject/verb agreements, pronoun/antecedent agreements, pronoun case, verb tense and shifts in point of view; and 3) distinguish between compound sentences, complex sentences, participial phrases, infinitive phrases and appositive phrases (1967, Spring, pp. 11-15). In the Part II version for English One students, nine questions asked students to identify and distinguish between introductory and subordinate clauses, compound sentences, appositives, participial constructions, main clauses, gerunds, elliptical constructions, thesis statements, main supporting statements, illustrative statements, refutations and irrelevancies. Three questions probed reading comprehension of a
short passage. One question asked the best definition for paradox. Two questions asked about lines of argument (pp. 7-10).

In Part III, all students were asked to write an impromptu, timed, “well organized and grammatically correct essay” (pp. 11, 16). The English Five version called for a 300-word explanation of one proverb from five listed choices (p.16). The English One students were asked to either analyze a short poem or discuss character conflict in two works of fiction (p. 11).

The Potential For Positive Change in City’s Writing Program (1965-68)

Berlin outlines how a group of new, more sophisticated writing pedagogies began to develop and spread during in the early 1960s that rejected reductive, old, formalist approaches (1987, pp. 139-179). These new models in part responded to “the Viet Nam war, racism, sexism and related issues (1987, pp. 139-140). They launched a new field of composition and rhetoric—often through the research, teaching and leadership of literature scholars who chose to turn serious attention to the theory and practice of writing instruction.

From 1965 to 1969, many of City’s literature scholars knew very little about composing theory. Alice Chandler, who chaired the department’s Composition Committee in the late 1960s (CCNY, 1966, December 1, p. 2), remembers that many City College literature faculty knew nothing about the newly emerging theories of writing process. “We imitated our faculty, who imitated their faculty, who…. back in the 13th Century in Oxford were doing the same thing—which was that we [were] looking for a superb final product. We [didn’t] care how you got there” (Molloy, 2012, p. 132, n.14). In 1968, Kriegel believed that “the art of writing is no more than the formal organization of language into coherent sentences and the subsequent organization of coherent sentences into coherent paragraphs” (1968, February 26, p. 270).

But City College was well positioned to join this 1960s wave of change in composition

As practicing writing teachers, some faculty were developing more sophisticated constructs of writing. During the 1960s, Kriegel taught sections of a short story writing course where he began to develop a sense of process theory. He saw that writing exposes a fragile ego that the student must nurture and the teacher must protect. In writing, the student’s problems, his ‘sickness’ might very well be the substance of his talent and the foundation of his art…. Writing was a pragmatic act, yet it was an act in which the student had to declare his own standards of measurement…. I learned to depend on the feel of the thing as a process, yet not to love the product too closely.” (1972, p. 146).

Other tenured professors were also supportive writing teachers. For example, Marvina White remembers Ed Quinn’s kind, helpful advice about her writing in his Shakespeare course (White 2014, January 27, p. 14). And Mirsky’s voice pilot was a cutting edge writing pedagogy.

I have found no detailed record of Mirsky’s City College courses; but the Stanford student paper reported on the Stanford pilot in 1966 and then John Hawkes wrote his own
detailed report in 1967, including an account of Mirsky’s teaching. Hawkes began with 100 volunteer students in September of 1966. The premise was to make “students more aware of the relationship between speaking voice and the “voice” one finds in the work of most good writers.” Creative writers (including Mirsky) taught a single 20 student “semi-tutorial” class that replaced freshman English. Grading was deferred. Writing was “based in large part on the interests and activities of the student.” Students read work aloud and tape-recorded themselves. Some students tutored the new voice model in local schools, including underprivileged schools (Livingston, 1966, September 23; Hawkes, 1967, pp. xi-xii). The theoretical complexity of Hawkes’ new model was grounded in an extended analysis of literal and metaphorical voice:

We wanted the student to know that the sound of his voice conveys something of his personality; that this personal intonation might well relate to the diction and rhythms of his writing; that a professional writer has a kind of total presence that can be perceived and responded to as authorial "voice"; that there is a difference between "voice" and style; that reading aloud is a way to achieve dramatic comprehension of literature as well as a better understanding of what may be happening in a student's own writing. To us, then, "voice" meant: 1) personality as heard in speech, 2) the kind of understanding we are able to "hear" in the voice of someone reading aloud, 3) the author's presence that we "hear" when we read silently, and 4) the various roles we sometimes assume in writing (Hawkes, 1967, p. xii).

Hawkes included detailed reports from three of Mirsky’s Spring 1967 Stanford classes. In Mirsky’s first class, (January 12) he asked students to shout and played back tapes of the shouting; they then analyzed kinds and purposes of shouting. He assigned readings from Botkin’s *A Treasury of American Folklore*, a Leviticus passage and *King Lear*. Students were
assigned “to write two pages insulting Mark” (1967, pp. 142-146). A week later (January 19) students read their papers insulting Mirsky aloud and discussed “the rhetorical difficulties involved in insulting.” They also read aloud from and discussed King Lear and Leviticus. Mirsky assigned a rereading of King Lear, two pages of writing praising him and a one-paragraph curse (pp. 146-48). In a February 23 class session on folklore, students played and discussed audiotaped stories they had collected. A guest speaker/speech writer discussed “language as political strategy,” played recordings of Kennedy and Nixon, and showed how Nixon drew on folklore (pp. 148-150).

Abolishing Composition and Approving a New High-Stakes Writing Exam (May, 1968)

On May 31, 1968, with Volpe as a “vigorous proponent,” the Faulty Council abolished all required writing courses at City College by converting English One, Three and Four to electives, effective February 1, 1969 (Volpe 1968, May p. 1; 1969, September 18, pp. 1-2;).

Abolition of all required composition and literature courses further reduced the department’s service role and teaching responsibilities. But they now assumed a new gatekeeper role:

English 1 is no longer a required course. On the basis of a student’s performance on a placement examination, we shall advise the student to take the remedial English 5 and the English 1 or declare his writing requirement satisfied. He need not accept this advice, but he shall have to pass a qualifying writing test before he is graduated. The responsibility for writing competence has now been transferred to the student, where it should be; but our writing courses must, if he decides to resort to them, provide him the opportunity to achieve the required competence (Volpe, 1968, May, p. 1).

In this new system, the department would administer two layers of writing tests: a first tier of placement tests and a second tier graduation test. Placement tests were not new, but now they
took on an important new role by dividing all incoming students into three tiers: those who already met departmental writing standards; those whose writing was inadequate enough to advise a semester of writing instruction; and those whose skills were the most inadequate, meriting referral to remedial instruction.

The immediate effect of the placement tiered test system was to label all students who required any writing instruction as inadequate. Moreover, all writing courses now took on a strong remedial cast—hardened at once by Volpe’s stated belief that their key purpose would be to prepare students for the second-tier writing exam. The new Proficiency Exam would enforce sentence correctness more efficiently: transfer students would have to pass it as well. And, as the Proficiency Exam was a graduation requirement, all writing instruction at City College, in any course, at any level—was now yoked to the requirements and assumptions of this new (still unformulated) high-stakes writing certification test.

**A Departmental Conversation About Writing Pedagogy (Summer 1968)**

In May of 1968, Volpe asked the entire English faculty, including lecturers, to comment over the summer about a number of issues relating to the new writing test and the department’s new course offerings. He promised to collate and publish the responses together in September of 1968 (Volpe 1968, May, p. 4). Ironically, the abolition of required English One led to a far-ranging discussion about writing pedagogy. Volpe asked:

Would it be best, for example, to change it into some kind of writing clinic, with limited technical goals; or should the objectives of English 1 extend beyond writing? I would judge that most of us believe that English 1 can be a very important educational experience for the college freshman. The challenge is to create the kind of course which students will also come to accept as essential to their education. And while we’re
thinking about English 1, we might also re-examine the content and the approach of English 5. We may, in the future, be offering many more sections of remedial English (p. 1).

Thirty-one professors and lecturers responded to Volpe with a wide variety of ideas about English One and English Five. Some of the ideas were prescriptive and formalist; but others offered new directions towards deeper rhetoric, writing process, student-centered inquiry, expressivism, themed courses, and/or workshop/tutorial models. At the conservative end, Associate Professor Brooks Wright urged multiple mandated placement tests and multiple English One courses, each of which focused solely on fixing one type of mechanical deficiency: grammar, usage, spelling, mechanics, reading, vocabulary or exposition (pp. 2-3). But Lecturer Barry Wallenstein called for more instructor autonomy and a less “prescriptive course” (p. 7). Professor Arthur Waldhorn suggested an honors course model for English One and a tutorial/writing clinic for English Five (pp.11-12). Assistant Professors Arthur Ganz and Daniel Leary espoused continued use of literature (pp. 11-12). But Assistant Professor James Greene proposed only non-fiction readings (pp. 6-7). Assistant Professor Saul Brody suggested themed courses and readings on an instructor-selected topic (p.19). Associate Professor Leo Hamalian proposed developing several shared course themes; he also suggested converting English Five to an intensive, three-week “crash” course (pp. 2-3).

Lecturer Robert Lippman argued that the new English One should merely teach the skills necessary to pass a new writing proficiency exam (p. 12). Assistant Professor Rachel Brownstein suggested a large lecture course in logic, grammar theory and semantics, with weekly discussion groups and instructor conferences (p. 10). But Assistant Professor Edward Quinn proposed a focus on personal writing with no concern given to grammar (p. 9). Instructor Byrne Fone would
have eliminated all writing instruction, based on his belief that “writing cannot be taught…. Some will write; others never can” (p. 13).

Assistant Professor James Ruoff urged the department to reconsider its long “subservience” to “the two sacred rituals of English 1: the weekly ‘Harvard theme’ and the ‘term paper’” (p. 20). Lecturer John Beston assumed only weaker students would register; he advised converting English One into a clinic with “intensive instruction in the punctuation of academic papers” (p. 10). But Ruoff warned against effectively merging English Five and English One, trapping many students in courses “too elementary—and too banal—to sustain their motivation.” Instead, Ruoff suggested 10-12 student workshop/tutorials with supervised, in-depth writing projects chosen by students and few fixed class sessions. Ruoff estimated only ten percent of students needed a course comparable to English 5; in any event, he urged that “the whole concept of ‘remedial’ ought to be banished from our minds and from the catalogue” (p. 20).

Assistant Professor Alice Chandler submitted the longest comments. She proposed replacing English Five and English One with a new three-course, “ascending sequence” structure. Her proposed pedagogy was conservative and formalist: her new “English I” focused on grammar and correctness; her new “English II” focused on expository essays; and her “English III” only moved beyond a “mainly corrective and hence negative focus” to enable students to “polish their writing” (p. 5). Chandler also proposed an idea she said she had raised before: to create a room for writing students with typewriters, writing tools, and graduate students as advisors (p. 6).

But others rejected formalism. SEEK instructor Robert Cumming argued that teaching each student to “become aware that writing is a way to discover his own life is the core of getting him to care about writing; hence to write well” (p. 21). Instructor Karl Malkoff urged that
technique “take a backseat to content” and to center the course on problems that most concerned students: “the crises that our society now faces” so that “writing itself would seem essential” (p. 19). Lecturer Eve Mirriam urged a writing clinic that rejected “dreary punctuation, paragraphing and polemical” approaches in favor of informal, conversational, narrative and ab-libbed writing, like a “writing version of an introductory actors’ studio course” (p. 18). Assistant professor Allan Danzig proposed a tutorial/workshop model with regular teacher conferences to discuss notes, outlines, fragments, drafts, or finished versions of student-selected projects (p. 15). Lecturer Ross Wetzsteon urged full student participation in shaping the course. That said, he also proposed a course focused on helping students “unlearn” bad habits acquired in high school; instead they would develop their own natural style, vocabulary and tone by writing “about subjects of intense interest to them” (pp. 15-16).

Volpe Launches “Basic Writing” (1969)

Volpe himself chaired an ad hoc committee to consider the advice from the 1968 summer survey. In January 1969, Volpe unveiled the new plan to the Department. There would be a group of “Department Courses” which Volpe explained “was a euphemism for ‘remedial’” (CCNY, 1969, January 16, p. 2; CCNY, 1969, pp. 67-68). These “remedial” courses were Basic Writing One (replacing the old English Five) and a series of five ESL “Grammatical Principles and Writing” courses. (CCNY, 1969, January 16, p. 2). These ESL courses had originated as English Six, and gradually expanded into a sequence of evening division courses. The Bulletin soon described Basic Writing One as: “Basic Writing. Prescribed for students who do not meet minimal standards on the Achievement Examination. An intensive course in the writing of essays, extending from a review of grammatical principles to an introduction to the research paper” (CCNY, 1969, p. 67). The first sentence effectively marked the course as remedial. The
second sentence repeated the old mainstream English One description, so the new Basic Writing course would be in theory similar to the eliminated mainstream course. But Volpe explained to the department that “basic writing” meant remedial writing, and he had the SEEK students in mind. Volpe promised to reword the Department course catalogue listings “in order to imply, insofar as possible, their appropriateness for [SEEK students] and the foreign born, as well as for those whose main language was not English” (CCNY, 1969, January 16, p. 2).

Volpe also revived the old English One and Two courses as elective writing workshops English 40 and 41. A compromise was struck between Chandler’s conservative pedagogy and the creative writers’ new models. Some of the workshop courses “emphasized traditional techniques, [all] directed by Professor Chandler,” while other courses would “be taught by professional writers from their own syllabi” (CCNY, 1969, January 16, p. 3). The 1969 Bulletin description of English 40 favored a conservative emphasis: “Writing Workshop I. The writing of essays. Emphasis on clarity, coherence, and personal expression. Some work in research methods. Frequent conferences required” (CCNY, 1969, p. 69). While some students were counseled to take English 40, they weren’t required to do so (CCNY, 1969, p. 66). Nonetheless, the referral system effectively marked this course also as preparation for the new Proficiency Exam.

In Volpe’s 1969 system, a placement test ranked all incoming students into three tiers. The lowest scoring students were required to take English One/Basic Writing or some of the new “Grammatical Principles” courses for multi-lingual students. They would have to pass these writing courses and then also pass the new writing proficiency exam. Middle scorers were counseled to take English 40 and they had to eventually pass the new proficiency exam. Top placement test scorers were designated as “exceptional.” They were excused from any further writing requirements. In an added layer of grammar enforcement, any City College teacher could
also refer a student to the English department for mandated “remedial work” (1969, January 16, pp.1-2; CCNY, 1969, p. 66).

While the English faculty was deeply conflicted, in mid-1968 many members were developing far-ranging ideas about new writing pedagogies; indeed, some were already practicing them. But Volpe led the department to largely ignore these new ideas and practices. Instead, the Department’s 1969 writing course system (which Volpe himself shaped) retained the old, reductive, error-centric pedagogy into which City College had devolved fifty years earlier. Volpe also systematized his belief that all SEEK courses were remedial by divorcing SEEK’s three semester writing sequence from any mainstream required courses. And he positioned all writing instruction at City College within a deficit model—the good, valued, “exceptional” students would be exempted from any writing course requirement. For 120 years, the English faculty had debated the role of grammar within college-level rhetoric and writing exercises and courses. Volpe effectively ended the debate by steering the department to abolish all mainstream, college-level writing courses, and by recasting new first-year writing courses (and the students placed into those courses) as basic—meaning remedial.
Chapter Eight

Johnson and Volpe: Reshaping The English Department and Segregating SEEK Lecturers (1964-1969)

Edgar Johnson was born in Brooklyn in 1901. His family moved out to New Jersey and he went to East Orange High School. He received his A.B. from Columbia in 1922 and began at once to teach there as an English instructor. In Columbia’s graduate schools, Johnson studied architecture for a year and literature for two, but he earned no advanced degrees. He also taught at Washington University and then Hunter College (Johnson, n.d.).

In 1927, Johnson was recruited and hired by English chair Lewis Mott as a tutor at City College—then the lowest teaching rank. As a tutor, Johnson generally taught “four sections in required composition classes and one in a survey of English literature” (Johnson, 1973, p. 2). Mott told him only to teach his courses “as you think best” (p. 6). In his composition courses, Johnson often read passages aloud from current authors including Lewis, Mencken, Hemingway, Cather, Lardner, Woolf, Galsworthy, Beerbohm, Joyce, Huxley, Proust, Ibsen, and Dostoyevsky—and then discussed the passages with his students (p. 6).

As a tutor, Johnson was appointed year to year, but he was not observed or monitored in any way for many years and his reappointments seemed more or less automatic (p. 13-17). “All of us I think, in almost all the Departments, had been taken on as tutors, consequently without tenure, and came to constitute a very large percentage of the teaching staff. Though there were annual salary increments, there were almost no promotions in rank” (p. 15). Johnson waited eight years for his promotion to instructor (Johnson, 1973, p. 20; CCNY, 1936, p. 48). He waited eight more years to reach assistant professor (CCNY, 1944, June 1, p. 32-33), four more to reach associate professor in 1947-48 (CCNY, 1948, p. 61) and five more for full professor (CCNY, 1953, p. 8).
From 1954 to 1964, Volpe’s own “teaching program had consisted of one literature and three composition courses…” (1972, p. 773). Almost a decade younger than Volpe, Theodore Gross earned his Ph.D. and joined the English department as an instructor in 1960 (CCNY, 1961a, p. 12). Gross also remembered a “time in our department when only senior professors taught electives and junior members of the staff taught three or four composition courses…” (Gross, 1972, January, p. 2). From 1961 to 1964, Kriegel spent most of his first three years at City teaching English One and English Four. Volpe recalled that before 1964, there was “a long standing tradition in the department that all members of the staff, no matter what their rank, be involved in the teaching of freshman composition.… We took much pride in being a teaching department” (1972, pp. 771-72).

Over his 45 year career at City College Johnson wrote two novels, and countless reviews and articles; but his major scholarly works were two “mammoth biographies of Dickens and Scott” that together took him twenty years to complete (Shenker, 1972, January 13). He was repeatedly elected as the department chair and served in that role from 1949 to 1964 (Johnson, 1973). Volpe succeeded Johnson as chair in 1964.

By 1964, the egalitarian structure City’s English Department was unusual among American four-year colleges; as early as the 1920s, most college writing instruction had been relegated to overworked temporary teachers and graduate students (Crowley, 1998, pp. 124-127; Connors 1997, p. 149; Brereton, 1995, pp. 18, 21). In 1965, Volpe reminded his colleagues that
not “too long ago, most of us had to wait many years to teach an elective” (1965, May 1, p. 4). But in Volpe’s first year as Chair, things changed. “Now, few of the tenure staff do not have electives, and many of our [tenure-track] instructors also are teaching their specialties” (1965, May 1, p. 4). This shift was not accidental. As the new chair, Volpe engineered several structural changes that encouraged, enabled, and sometimes even required the tenured ranks to avoid almost all responsibility for teaching writing courses—just as more diverse first-year students began to enter City College.

**Johnson’s Department Shares Teaching Duties (1927-1964)**

In the City College English department from the 1920s to the 1950s, advancement to tenure was a slow process—but it was available for almost all teachers, at least in the day division. The 1953-54 English faculty totaled 54 members, including 50 tenure or tenure track teachers and only four temporary lecturers (CCNY, 1954, September 1, p. 38). There were more temporary teachers in the evening division. But excluding the evening lecturers, the vast bulk of the City College English staff remained in tenure track titles until 1964-65 (See Table Two below). This egalitarian structure created a community of interest that promoted equitable treatment for writing course teachers. For example, Johnson reported on his battles to keep required composition and literature course class sizes as small as possible (Johnson, 1953, April 9, p. 1; 1954, April 1, p. 1).

Although a Ph.D. gradually became a prerequisite for tenure track positions by the mid-1950s, there were still exceptions as late as 1957, when Leonard Erhlich was promoted from

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37 For example, in 1954-55, the listed English day faculty (excluding Baruch) totaled 44 members, with only 5 lecturers (CCNY, 1955a, September 1, pp. 6-17). But the Evening Division Bulletin listed another 10 English lecturers who were not included on the day-division faculty list. The lecturers were Lois Berenson, Roger Jones, Leonard Manheim, Burton Pollin, Victor Reed, Lois Robinson, Stephen Schwartz, J. Milton Sherman, and Louis Trilling. (CCNY, 1955b, September 1, pp. 8-15).
lecturer to instructor, with only a 1928 B.A. from City College; Erhlich was an assistant professor by 1963-64 (Middlebrook, 1957, April, p. 3; CCNY, 1964, p. 10). Other lecturers who were working on Ph.D.s could be promoted on completion. In 1953, Vernon Harvard was granted tenure with the condition that he complete his Ph.D. by the following fall (Johnson, 1953, April 9, p. 1). James Emmanuel, Anne Paolucci and Edward Potoker were all lecturers in 1960-61 (CCNY, 1961a, pp. 10, 19, 20). By 1964-65, Emmanuel and Paolucci were assistant professors and Potoker was an instructor (CCNY, 1965a, pp. 64, 65). The opportunities for internal advancement were so broad that a Middle States evaluation team even appears to have accused the department of “inbreeding” (Middlebrook, 1957, April, p 1).

A Shift from Required to Elective Courses (1964-1969)

Although the overall City College curriculum changes in the 1960s promoted electives, Volpe used these reforms to effect a remarkable and rapid shift in faculty workloads. In Fall 1950, the English department had offered 78 required courses, only 21 total elective sections and only 10 literature elective sections. As late as 1957, Acting Chair Samuel Middlebrook reported: “required composition still takes up most of our time.” Middlebrook counted 105 actual required course sections and 27 elective sections (1957, April, pp. 1-2). Some Day Division campus schedules have been preserved by the City College archives, and the scheduled listed English courses summarized in Table One. These schedules don’t show Evening or Baruch classes. The SEEK classes that began in 1965 are also not listed. Still they show a remarkable departmental shift from required courses to elective courses from 1950 to 1970.

The English faculty had long coveted opportunities to teach literature electives. But until the mid-1960s, the English department’s workload was overwhelmingly composed of required courses. Even among the small group of elective sections, about half were writing courses or a
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Usage and syntax grammar theory course. Teachers waited many years to teach literature electives because those courses were rare and most everyone was in the same seniority group. By Fall 1960, total electives (29) and literature electives (19) had modestly increased. But six years later in Fall 1966, total electives (57) and literature electives (38) had doubled. In Spring 1968 total electives (71) and literature electives (50) continued to expand. In Fall 1969, required writing and literature courses had been eliminated for many students and total English elective sections (140) and literature electives (92) close to doubled again.

**Increasing the Workload of Writing Teachers (1965)**

In the 1964 curriculum revision, the entire City College faculty essentially voted itself a substantial compensation increase: all full time teachers would now receive the same salaries for teaching three courses instead of four. In theory, they would also do more research and
publishing. But many, like Johnson, were already serious researchers. The tenure track for new hires, like Ballard in 1961, was now only three years; those with tenure had jobs for life whether they conducted research or not. Johnson joked that most “college teachers obtain the Ph.D. as a sort of union card, and are thenceforth content to coast uphill, as it were, letting age, inertia, the ties of friendship, and some judicious logrolling carry them to the peak of a full professorship” (1973, p. 18). As teachers, everybody would now receive the same pay for 25% less work.

An English Department ad hoc committee ran the math in October of 1964: by their count there were then 66 active instructors. In one semester, English One and English Two ran a total of 98 sections each semester. All other English department courses added up to 105 sections, for a departmental workload of 203 sections taught by 66 teachers. Eliminating English Two saved 49 sections. Not all teachers taught a full load; a few taught part-time or had “special remissions.” In all, the committee believed the whole department could switch to a three-course teaching load if they hired three more full-time teachers (CCNY, 1964, October 3).

But the big salary raise in the Fall of 1965 did not benefit all English teachers equally, because the Department beefed up English One from a two-hour/two credit course to a three-hour/four credit course. Before 1965, there had been a workload offset for teaching writing courses: an instructor with three sections of English One or English Two and one literature course taught for nine classroom hours, while an instructor teaching four literature courses taught twelve hours. This built-in composition offset recognized the extra conference and student theme work performed in writing courses—as a department of writing teachers, everyone knew the writing courses were much more work. The October 1964 ad hoc committee proposed that the new English Ones should count for six hours of teaching credit, representing three class hours and three conference hours (CCNY, 1964, October 3). This would have made two English One
sections a full-time teaching load. But it does not appear the department ever offered such credit after 1964. Certainly, the SEEK writing instructors did not receive it.

Instead, in the system beginning in Fall 1965, a teacher with three sections of the new English One course would teach nine class hours—the same classroom hours as an instructor with literature courses. The extra work was even more clear for SEEK English teachers. Beginning in Fall 1965, they taught three sections of stretched five-class hour versions of English One, making their teaching load fifteen classroom hours, while the literature class teachers taught only nine. And the SEEK teachers often had four or five day schedules when the rest of the department dropped down to a three day schedule. And all writing teachers still were expected to grade hundreds of essays and meet regularly with all their students. (Here, the SEEK class size caps were at least smaller than the mainstream English One sections.) As such, starting in 1965, there was a substantial new workload penalty built into every English One assignment and a larger penalty built into every SEEK writing class assignment.

In sum, as the tenured faculty taught fewer courses and Volpe expanded the number of elective courses available to them, the department also created new penalties for teaching writing courses. The net result both enabled and pressured the tenured faculty to avoid writing courses as never before. As the tenured ranks dropped writing courses, Volpe needed more teachers.

**Building a Two-Tiered Department (1965-1969)**

Starting in 1965, Volpe covered the department’s writing courses by hiring many more temporary lecturers. Table Two is drawn from the lists of day division faculty in the City College bulletins from 1955 to 1970. As I noted above, there was a significant pool of evening division

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38 Faculties for years 63-64 and earlier are drawn from in CLAS bulletin comprehensive alphabetical lists, excluding those denoted as Baruch faculty. CLAS faculties for years 64-65 and 65-66 were listed by department; there, I excluded all faculty also listed in the Baruch bulletin.
lecturers in 1954-1955 who did not appear in day division faculty lists and that practice continued into the 1960s. But within the day division in 1960-61 there were still only eight English lecturers. In 1963-64, there were 18 lecturers. In 1964-65, there were 27 lecturers. In 1965-66—as reduced teaching loads, the new English One course, and the SEEK program all went into effect, the total lecturers almost doubled to 51—accounting for half of the active teachers for that year. Lecturers dipped down to 36 in 1966-67 as English Two wound down. But the number of lecturers rebounded to 53 in 1967-68 and jumped to 72 in 1969-70, Volpe’s final year as chairman. Over Volpe’s six years as chair, the English tenure ranks increased from 57 to 76 teachers. But the number of lecturers quadrupled during those same six years from 18 to 72.


For example, in 1960-61, I count 25 out of 44 Evening Division faculty who were not also listed in the day session bulletin, including 23 lecturers, instructor Herbert Marder, and assistant professor Dorothy Van Ghent (CCNY, 1961a, pp. 6-21, 1961b, pp. 5-27). In 1965-66, I count 17 of 37 Evening Division faculty as not also listed on the Day division lists: 16 lecturers and instructor Carl Craycraft (CCNY, 1966a, pp. 6-20, 1966b, pp. 56-61).
Volpe increased temporary writing teachers several direct ways. He assigned writing courses to his new writers-in-residence. He used Mark Mirsky’s innovative English One voice course model to push English One courses to more creative writer/lecturers. In 1967, Volpe began a new teaching intern program and assigned masters degree students to teach English One (Volpe, 1967, May 15, p. 3). But by far Volpe’s most important action in creating a large, permanent sub-class of writing teachers was his 1965 decision to segregate SEEK courses to be taught only by a staff of “special” instructors.

**Segregating SEEK English Instructors (1965-1969)**

In the Fall of 1965, Berger and Ballard tried to build faculty support and integrate SEEK into the mainstream of the college. But they faced varying levels of resistance from different departments:

A compromise was reached; in departments…such as English, where there would be a large number of students, the department would hire SEEK teachers with the consent of SEEK. Teachers would be SEEK teachers, paid by the SEEK Program, yet they would also be members of the English Department. There would be no special SEEK staff in Math. The regular members of the department would teach SEEK courses in an effort to allow all the teachers to have some sense of who our students were. In Speech and languages, teachers would teach both SEEK and regular courses….Reading, Social Sciences and Counseling would fall directly under SEEK and would relate to no other division but SEEK. (Berger, 1969-70, pp. 14-15).

Each staffing plan effectively evidenced the department’s initial support for (or hostility to) the new program: mathematics, speech and languages were the most supportive departments and
their regular faculty taught SEEK students. The social sciences were the most hostile, refusing to participate at all. Volpe publicly embraced SEEK while he quietly marginalized it.

Volpe later wrote that he had spent his nine months as chair in 1964 and 1965 “planning the elimination of freshman composition and upgrading the electives program for English majors” until Berger called him to help with SEEK (1972, p. 765). In Volpe’s memory, Berger asked only for limited involvement and Volpe agreed to set up new SEEK writing courses and staff them as part of his department—largely because he wanted to protect the department’s monopoly over English instruction anywhere on campus (p. 766). Volpe then considered whether to assign or allow regular faculty to teach the new SEEK courses. In 1972, he wrote an elaborate rationalization for his 1965 decision. The tenure-track faculty, Volpe had decided, were too busy with committee work and scholarship; he could not assign more than one “remedial section” to each of them in each year; many would resist; their “major interest was reading literature, teaching it and writing about it;” such assignments would cause professors to “lose status in the department;” they would likely be inflexible teachers unwilling to try new methods; and the rotation of teachers would impair continuity (1972, p. 772). Of course Volpe himself had substantial control over committee work and departmental status. Most other concerns would have been solved had he simply asked for volunteers. Whatever his real reasons were—Volpe chose to end the century long tradition of sharing composition responsibilities throughout the

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40 There were two Fall 1965 SEEK math sections; one was taught by associate professor Howard Bergman. There were three SEEK speech sections, one taught by assistant professor Irving Branman. The other SEEK courses were all taught by lecturers (“Pre-baccalaureate,” 1965, October 7). But several academic departments also at once enrolled SEEK students into their regular courses: Art (41 students in 19 sections of Art 1), Music (33 students in 11 sections of Music 1), French and Spanish (25 total students in different courses) and Math (seven students in four courses) (Levy & Berger, 1965, p. 23).
department. He hired instead a group of “special lecturers” who would teach only SEEK writing courses (Volpe, 1972, p. 773).

For two years, Volpe did not allow regular English faculty 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 (Minutes, 1967, March 2, p. 2). In SEEK’s third year—now that volunteering was allowed—six members did volunteer, but Volpe assigned SEEK classes to only three of them. In the next two years, according to Volpe about a dozen professors volunteered to teach one SEEK course but only one requested a second course. The rest, according to Volpe, found the SEEK courses “absorbed…a great deal of their time and energy, far more…than they could afford to give” (Volpe, 1972, p. 773). Volpe’s smug suggestion that the SEEK students were somehow inferior or unteachable belied the structures he himself created by adding to the already heavy workload in all writing courses and then increasing it even more for SEEK sections while reducing the teaching load for literature courses.

Kriegel was one of the successful volunteers; he taught two SEEK writing classes in 1967-68. He did find his first class very challenging—but not because there was anything wrong with the fourteen SEEK students. Kriegel found some errors in their first batch of papers, but that did not surprise him; and the students had already improved their mechanics in another SEEK course. What surprised Kriegel in those papers was his students’ initial mix of raw anger and banal ideas. More shocking to Kriegel was that when he sent the students to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to write about a statue, most didn’t already know its location; some were even

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41 (Kriegel, 1972, pp. 174-184). It appears the other two successful volunteers were associate professor Leo Hamalian, and assistant professor Edward Quinn (Volpe, 1967, May 15, p. 2; 1972, p. 773; Kriegel & Quinn, 1984, April 7).
uncomfortable going there (1968, p. 271). For a while, Kriegel focused on fixing grammar and syntax and most of the students wrote “terribly pedestrian papers.” But then Kriegel began to learn about his students’ fears and goals; he found they were a lot like his other students; they began to open up to him. “Quite suddenly, they were students, interested in discovering what they could, aware of Vietnam, of the unrest on campus, aware now of a world filled with possibilities as well as threats” (1968, p. 272). Soon “they had begun to find a voice” (1968, p. 273). In all, Kriegel learned that the SEEK students possessed “as much potential as middle class” students. And he wrote that the SEEK program was “one of the few hopeful signs in what is called ‘higher education’” as it worked to break down the “wall built out of ‘academic standards’” that City College had built “to protect itself from Harlem” (1968, pp. 272-273).

In 1971, Addison Gayle (who had been a SEEK English lecturer from 1967 to 1969) publicly charged that the 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 discouraging both white applicants for SEEK positions and regular faculty from teaching in SEEK (Gayle, 1971, p. 55). Moreover, Gayle recalled that he and the other SEEK lecturers “were 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).

In 1966, having segregated the first three SEEK lecturers, Volpe praised their “total commitment” because “their teaching load of three composition courses is extraordinarily heavy, the demands upon their energy and time are far greater than those upon the regular teachers, and each of them deserves our gratitude and commendation” (Volpe, 1966, May 16, p. 5). A year
later, Volpe again praised the (now seven) SEEK lecturers, even as he observed that SEEK had added a “major responsibility” to the department. In Volpe’s view, SEEK had “introduced a number of serious problems which have not yet been resolved, and it has only been through the total dedication of the program’s director… and of his staff that we have been able to embrace this important program” (Volpe, 1967, May 15, p. 2).

In his 1968 report, Volpe recognized that the high percentage of English faculty in temporary ranks was “a major concern” which had led the department’s committee on appointments to increase professorial lines and to decrease both full-time and part-time lecturers. (Volpe, 1968, p. 3). However, Volpe completely excluded the SEEK lecturers from his discussion of the issue—arguing that SEEK funding did not allow him to control “the distribution of rank among members of that staff” (Volpe, 1968, p. 3). The SEEK instructors would remain in the department’s rapidly expanding lower, temporary teacher tier.


Of course, the segregation of the SEEK lecturers was part of a larger pattern of gender and racial exclusion. Before the mid-1960s, the English department was overwhelmingly white and male. In 1954, Johnson announced a plan “to diversify our ranks;” but he meant hiring

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“men…[from graduate schools beyond] the eastern seaboard from which so many of ourselves have been drawn” (1954, April 1). Women were expressly excluded from the faculty until about 1958-1959, when Johnson took credit for “persuading the department to admit women teachers to our ranks” (1973, p. 24). Table Three shows the gender breakdown of the day division faculty 1954 to 1970. In 1960-61, the lone woman in the day division tenure track ranks was instructor Rose Zimbardo (CCNY, 1961a, p. 27). In 1960-61, there were only two women lecturers in the City College day division (Anne Paolucci and Janice Warnke) and none at any rank listed among the Baruch English day division staff (CCNY, 1961c, pp. 5-27).

The male professors were less careful about excluding women from the evening division faculty. At least two women—Lois Berenson and Lois Robinson—were evening division lecturers before the department officially agreed to hire women teachers (CCNY, 1955b, September 1, pp. 8-15). In 1960-61, Anne Freemantle, Marilyn Manley, Mary Richards, Lois Robinson, and Frances Warfield were evening lecturers (CCNY, 1961b, pp. 10-21). Dorothy Van Ghent, who held a 1948 Berkeley Ph.D., was listed as an evening assistant professor—the only assistant professor I have found in the evening bulletins who was not also listed on the day faculty (p. 20).

Gradually a few women were hired or promoted into the day division tenure ranks. In 1963-64, Alice Chandler and Zimbardo were assistant professors and Barbara Watson was an instructor (CCNY, 1964, pp. 5-33). Paolucci completed her Ph.D. in 1963 and was promoted from lecturer to instructor; she was promoted to assistant professor a year later (CCNY, 1964, p. 23; CCNY, 1965a, p. 65). But almost all the gender integration of the department faculty during the 1960s was within its lowest rank. In 1969-70, there were still only five women in the day division tenure track ranks; but there were thirty-three women lecturers.
Racial integration followed a similar pattern. Until the late 1960s, the only City College black tenure track rank member was James Emanuel, who was listed as a lecturer at Baruch in 1960-61, an instructor at Baruch in 1963-64 (after earning his Ph.D. from Columbia in 1962) and an assistant professor at City College in 1964-65 (CCNY, 1961, p. 10; 1964, p. 12; 1965, p. 64). As the numbers of temporary lecturers grew during the 1960s, they served to integrate the department by both race and gender—but largely at the margins. During Volpe’s six years of leadership, little changed among the tenure track ranks.

**Professing “Academic Schizophrenia” (1969)**

Almost certainly the most significant forces that shaped writing instruction at City College under Volpe’s leadership were the changes to the departments structures and culture that induced, enabled and sometimes required the tenured faculty’s withdrawal from writing instruction. Although the City College English faculty had long disdained and tried to avoid teaching first-year writing courses, they did teach them until 1964; for over a century, they had remained a teaching department—just as City itself had remained a teaching college (Soliday, 2002, p. 55). But starting in 1965—as desegregation began and expanded admissions loomed—the tenured faculty withdrew almost completely from writing instruction. In 1969, with his own doubts and his own department clearly in mind, Volpe argued that many English departments suffered from an acute case of academic schizophrenia. We view ourselves as curators of the pure academic discipline of English and American literature…. We are, in fact, departments of literature and writing, with duties that, unfortunately conflict with our image of ourselves as specialized literary scholars…. Consider the problem that has developed because we must teach writing at the freshman and, frequently, remedial levels. Why, in the first
place, should a department of literary scholars be forced to teach writing at this level?

What training for this most difficult of department tasks have we had? As departments we pay much lip-service to the importance of this responsibility, but as individuals we eagerly seek release from this onerous chore. Many of us even measure our departmental status by our power to escape assignment to freshman writing (Volpe, 1969, September 18, p. 6).

Volpe saw this metaphorical schizophrenia as the reason that writing courses were taught in “many, many departments by untrained, inexperienced Ph.D. candidates” (p. 6). And he recognized that many English departments “have not yet begun to train… teachers to teach writing” even as they also refused to hire professional writers or writing specialists (p. 7). While he argued for teacher training and the hiring of writing specialists, Volpe’s “academic schizophrenia” metaphor mainly rationalized his own colleagues’ growing aversion to teaching writing to newly diverse students. (Volpe wrote this talk and sent it to his department just after student protests had provoked CUNY to plan a new “Open Admissions” policy.)

Berger and Ballard had carefully designed most SEEK courses to align with mainstream “basic” courses, including SEEK’s English One and English Two courses. When they added introductory courses within SEEK, they accepted the College’s English Five “remedial” course label. But Volpe ignored all these distinctions and relabeled all SEEK English courses as remedial (1972, pp. 766, 768, 769). Only a few English Five “remedial” sections were offered each semester outside of SEEK; and so, Volpe’s complaint about literature scholars being asked to teach composition at “remedial levels” was a coded or a semi-conscious reference to teaching SEEK students.

Moreover, there was no basis for Volpe’s claim that City’s literature scholars could not
become serious, competent writing teachers. All of them had begun at City as writing teachers; some (including Volpe) had taught writing courses for many years. Writing instruction had been the main work of the department for many decades. The summer 1968 departmental discussion of writing pedagogy offered sophisticated new possibilities and revealed that the department was still engaged with writing pedagogy. Mirsky’s voice version of English One was an exciting new writing course model. In the end, Volpe’s “academic schizophrenia,” like Myrdal’s “American dilemma” 25 years earlier, was no true dilemma at all. It was merely a failure of conscience.

Volpe was not alone in his aversion to teaching writing to SEEK students. Ted Gross followed Volpe as English chair from 1970 to 1972 (Gross, 1980, p. 9). Like Volpe, Gross also supported desegregating City College in theory. “If we cannot bridge these two worlds, then we have repudiated the possibility of helping to cure a cancer that has run through American history and that inflicts the entire world in which we live. I cannot think of a more important purpose for a humanist than the one with which we have been charged” (Gross, 1972, January, p. 3). At the same time, Gross also seemed overwhelmed by the reality of teaching diverse students in a time of change:

Many of us have been trained for an elite profession, but we are asked to perform democratic tasks; we have written dissertations on Spencer, but we are teaching remedial writing; we are committed to the book, but the students have been culturally shaped by television and film; we have studied a body of culture that is fundamentally Anglo-Saxon, but we teach many students who are Black and Asian and Spanish… we are in an “English” department, but our work is involved with the literature of the world and with the language that is spoken by Americans (Gross, 1972, January, p. 1).
In 1980, Gross wrote that “the older professors” never even tried to adapt to this new reality. Echoing Volpe, Gross saw the “younger faculty” in the late 1960s and early 1970s as “academic schizophrenics, holding what seemed to be two opposing ideas—literacy and literature—in their minds at the same time” (1980, pp. 10-11). Deeply conflicted about these new students, Gross wondered:

were we who had advanced degrees from Columbia and N.Y.U., who had been trained the best that has been thought and said—were we prepared to teach Shakespeare to a student who two years earlier had been struggling to compose coherent sentences?…

were [faculty who were also City College alumni] using academic standards as a mask for their own deepest fears and anxieties? But in fairness, could the new student learn to read Shakespeare, even if we learned how to teach him to do so?” (1980, p. 6).

At the same time, Gross also asserted that City College itself was innocent; its academic standards were “like a code of honor which had never included considerations of class, race, religion, or national origin” (1980, pp. 7-8). While Gross claimed to have “struggled to invent pedagogical devices that would make our teaching more effective,” he also argued with apparent pride that his department had resisted pedagogical innovation:

In any event, for most students, writing is expository, and exposition is standardized and should be clear…and logical. It is the obligation of every English teacher to give students this primary skill. At the City College we were too overwhelmed by the immensity of our problems to engage in theories about language acquisition. We never surrendered the conviction that our first obligation was to offer the conventional language conventionally, and we tried to teach those underprepared students in the way that we had taught thousands of other freshmen (1978, February 4, p. 16).
Perhaps most tellingly—by 1978, Gross openly asserted that City’s efforts to teach new students “with deep linguistic shortcomings” had been doomed to fail all along. Gross now believed that “fundamental literacy” was not enough. Rather, to succeed in college, these new students required a generation of “social acculturation…. And the impossible burden that we assumed was one properly meant for the community colleges of City University” (1978, February 4, pp. 16-17; 1980. p. 23).

Kriegel also observed that the Department in the early 1960s included “older teachers who had themselves graduated from City in the twenties and early thirties” (1972, p. 138). Noting that some of these professors had reduced teaching to merely “a question of style” with an “indifference to politics,” Kriegel “could not understand how some of [his] colleagues could remain oblivious to the very contradictions they embodied. They had lived through the first half of the twentieth century, but they had somehow never permitted it to touch them” (1972, p. 139). In Kriegel’s eyes, Volpe was part of this departmental myopia. When the Department elected Volpe as its new chair in 1964, he didn’t seem “able or willing to view City College in relation to Harlem and New York or even America (1972, p. 150). Moreover, to Kriegel, the issue of race in academic life was unlike any other issue, for no one wanted to deal with it. It threatened us in a way that no other issue, not even Viet Nam had threatened us….In the years to come I was to hear the term racist randomly hurled at too many people who did not deserve it….On the other hand, there were those who remained aloof from the very real problems and aspirations of young blacks, convinced that the presence of blacks actually threatened to destroy the college” (1972, p. 168).

By 1969, the conflict between demands for racial justice and defense of traditional standards overwhelmed even Kriegel. “No member of the faculty felt that he could protect his world
convincingly….the truth was that I no longer knew where I stood. Ideally, I suppose, I wanted a college that would permit me to stand in all corners” (1972, p. 171).
Chapter Nine

Bambara, Penale, Christian and Gayle:
Shaping SEEK’s Basic English Program (1965-1968)

As Toni Cade Bambara (then Miltona Mirkin Cade) walked to her first day of kindergarten at P.S. 186 on West 145th Street in Harlem in 1944 or 1945, she dreamed of school as a magical place of discovery and creativity. Her head was full of questions and she believed that “knowledgeable people who loved children” would help her find the answers (Bambara, 1968, April 25; Holmes, 2014). But over the next twenty years, almost all of Bambara’s schools (including City College) disappointed her. She especially hated her high schools, “each worse than the last—chaotic, despotic, idiotic, vile.” Instead, “mad with appetite,” she learned to pursue her own questions. She “devoured the libraries, gobbled up films, picked brains, traveled, hung out, hustled, [and] haunted New York” (Bambara, 1968, April 25).

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The son of Italian immigrants, Anthony Penale was born in about 1915 into a rapidly growing family; as a boy in Niagara Falls, New York, Penale soon had ten brothers and sisters (Penale, 2010). He graduated Niagara Falls High School in 1932 (Penale, 2015, October 8), started at Middlebury College (“Anthony,” 1934, May 2), and some years later graduated from the University of Chicago (“Degree,” 1941, June 16). Penale hosted a local Saturday radio show where he reviewed works of literature (“Penale,” 1942, May 23). During World War II, he served in the army’s Specialized Training Program at Boston College (“Lieutenant,” 1944, January 25).

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In 1959, at only age fifteen, Barbara Christian left her childhood home on St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands and entered Marquette University in far-off, wintery Wisconsin. She had been
the star pupil and valedictorian at Saints Peter and Paul Catholic High School; after she won a 1958 speech contest, Howard University had offered to admit her at age fourteen (Christian, 2000, June 27). Christian’s parents were activists; her father Alphonso earned a law degree by correspondence school; eventually he would become a federal judge. Her mother Ruth later remembered that Alphonso “always corrected everyone’s English” (Oliver, 2000, July 9; “Judge,” 2005, July 25).

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Born in 1932 in small, segregated Newport News, Virginia, Addison Gayle, Jr. was raised in poverty by his single-mother after she left his violent, angry father and moved across town. Nate Norment observes that the dark-skinned Gayle “simultaneously battled the blatant racism between racist whites and blacks, and the color complex that had long been instituted by a white slave system [and] perpetuated by condescending, lighter skinned black elitists and socialites” (Norment, 2009, p. xxxii). Gayle began to repress bad memories by age six; by age twelve, his anger was beginning to consume him (Gayle, 1977, pp. 4-8).

As a boy, Gayle dreaded visiting his father every Sunday; Addison Gayle, Sr. was an eloquent and literate Communist activist, union organizer, and candidate for Congress whose ambitions and potential were gradually crushed by American apartheid (Gayle, 1977, pp. 5-18). He pressed his son to read far more advanced books than those offered in his segregated public school: young Gayle read *Crime and Punishment* inside the assigned *Dick and Jane* books (pp. 4-5). In high school, Gayle retreated into creative writing; he completed a play about Copernicus and a 300-page novel (pp. 27-28, 49-50). But when Gayle graduated high school in 1950, he had no opportunity to go on to college. After six months in the Air Force, he returned home to Newport News and lived there until his father died in 1952; then Gayle left home and drifted
through Newark, where he battled depression and attempted suicide, as well as Detroit, and Philadelphia. In 1955, at age 23, Gayle moved to Harlem (pp. 63-85).

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In 1954, at age fifteen, Bambara entered the then virtually all-white Queens College and became a drama major. In 1959, she won the college’s literature award for her portfolio of short stories and poems, graduating at age 20. That same year, her first short story, “Sweet Town,” was published. Bambara’s parents had fought bitterly and divorced by the time she was ten; In July of 1959, she married Anthony Batten; their marriage lasted only a year (Holmes, 2014 pp. 15, 37-40). After college, Bambara worked as a social worker in Harlem for several years. Then she took an extended trip to Europe, living in Rome and Florence (Holmes, 2014, pp. 40-41).

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In Christian’s first year at Marquette, the poetry of T.S. Eliot ignited her interest in literature (“Barbara Christian,” 2000, July 9). She graduated with distinction in 1963. Although she was only nineteen years old, Christian was selected as the graduation keynote speaker. Her family urged her toward medical school, but Christian chose Columbia’s doctoral program in literature (“Barbara Christian,” 2000, July 9). She wanted to be close to Harlem; soon, she began to focus on black women writers (Oliver, 2000, June 27). Christian earned her masters degree at Columbia in 1964. In the summer of 1965, still only twenty-one years old, Christian taught summer courses at the College of the Virgin Islands; back in New York, she also began to teach at Hunter College (Christian, 2000, June 27).

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After World War II, Penale earned his master’s degree from Columbia in 1948. But he struggled to find his path through life. A creative writer, Penale wrote several plays; but they were not produced (Charlton, 1996, March 22). He married Eve, another Columbia student; but they soon divorced, and cancer took her life in 1962 (Penale, 2015, October 8; Mrs E.G. Penale, 1962, October 17). Penale worked on his Ph.D. dissertation, but he didn’t finish it (Charlton, 1996, March 22). In 1959, Penale began teaching evening English courses as a lecturer at City College’s business school (CCNY, 1960, p. 21). In 1964-65, he also began to teach some courses at City College’s main campus (CCNY, 1965a, p. 19; CCNY, 1965b, p. 66).

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Gayle lived in Harlem and Brooklyn for several years, working a series of jobs as a hospital orderly and porter. Then, he was falsely arrested, accused of burglary, handcuffed, interrogated and beaten by two white policemen. Gayle sat in jail until a friend was able to post $500 bail. He hired a lawyer who quickly got the charges dismissed (Gayle, 1977, pp. 88-92). But this experience hardened Gayle to adopt “a defensive stance toward all” white people; it also motivated him to change his life:

I knew I would continue to write, continue to send out poems, essays, short stories, receive rejection slips; but I would also, until I published something, continue to work at such orderly and porter jobs, leaving myself vulnerable to Blacks and whites alike. Most of all, I knew I would not achieve… [the] victory over… my enemies which I hungered for unless I set immediate goals for myself. This realization drove me in 1960, at the age of twenty-eight, to enroll in college, in the City College of New York (p. 93). Gayle studied for two years as a non-matriculated, evening student; Berger counseled and encouraged him—leading them to become lifelong friends (pp. 93-96). During this time Gayle
was refused a cafeteria job in Brooklyn due to his race; he brought a discrimination charge and was eventually awarded $120 in lost wages (“SCAD,” 1962, July 21). After two years in night school, Gayle was admitted to the day division. In June of 1965, he graduated with a Jonas Salk scholarship; Gayle and his wife immediately took a train out to UCLA to begin his masters’ work. In Los Angeles, Gayle worked every day at his desk from four am to six pm—straining his marriage to the breaking point. But Gayle earned his masters degree and published two scholarly articles in a single year (Gayle, 1977, pp. 111-114).

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In 1964, after she returned from Europe to New York, Bambara entered City College as a masters student. When a landlord refused to rent her an Eighth Avenue apartment, her white friend applied and was offered the apartment; they filed a civil rights complaint (Holmes, 2014, p. 42). She also took the Amsterdam News to task for its conservative attacks on a civil rights protest group as a “red conspiracy.” Bambara’s letter to the editor warned:

If an oppressed people cannot improve their lot through public funds, then American foreign aid to underdeveloped nations is a laugh. If an oppressed people cannot aspire to better conditions through public funds, the whole anti-poverty program is a joke. If an oppressed people cannot protest injustice, must suffer calumny and witchhunts and smears, then democracy is a farce. And if the Amsterdam News fails to recognize its commitment to the whole freedom movement, then the term free press should be relegated to the waste basket (Bambara, 1964, November 14).

In February of 1965, Bambara completed her master’s degree at City College. Her thesis was on “The American Adolescent Apprentice Novel” (Zeichner, 1965, October 7, p.1).

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Creating SEEK’s Writing Program (1965-1967).

In the summer of 1965, Volpe assigned Penale (then 50 years old) as SEEK’s first English coordinator; Volpe also hired Bambara (then 26 years old) as a full-time SEEK lecturer. “I…appointed a man with many years of teaching experience who, I knew, honestly enjoyed teaching freshmen, and a young black woman whom I had known and admired as a graduate student” (Volpe, 1972, p. 773). In the Fall of 1965, Penale and Bambara taught writing to all of the 113 pilot class SEEK students; they each taught two day sections and one evening section of SEEK’s new stretched, five-hour version of English One—with an average of 19 students per section. Bambara had a long three-day teaching schedule. Her classes met: M.W.F. 2-3:25; W.W.F. 3:40-5:05; M.W.F. 7:40-10:10. Penale had a five-day teaching schedule: M.W.F. 2-3:25; W.W.F. 3:40-5:05; Tu.Th. 7:40-10:10. (“Pre-Baccalaureate,” 1965, October 7, p. 2).

Sometime in the Fall of 1965, Volpe also hired the 21 year-old Christian, who began teaching as a part-time SEEK lecturer that Spring, just after her twenty-second birthday (Volpe 1966, May 15, p. 5; Christian, 2000, June 27). In 1966-67, Volpe hired four more SEEK lecturers: Amy Sticht, Addison Gayle, Janet Mayes (Singer) and Fred Byron. They joined Penale, Bambara and Christian (Volpe, 1967, May, p. 2). Gayle credited Berger with assisting him to get the job (Gayle, 1977, p. 115). All seven SEEK English teachers were lecturers with temporary appointments.

A Window of Opportunity For Change (1965-1968)

Temporary writing teachers often have had little authority to shape writing courses or to challenge institutional pedagogies. But there are rare moments when dramatic change within writing programs is possible (Wardle, 2013, p. 4). The SEEK writing teachers had two sets of bosses: Volpe in English and Berger and Ballard in SEEK. But at first Volpe and the English
department had little interest in SEEK: “When the program began, very few members of the faculty were even aware of it, and those of us who were, treated it rather casually, as a peripheral concern. After helping to set up the remedial courses and appointing teachers for them, I returned to what I considered my proper business” (Volpe, 1972, p. 768). Administrative indifference and aversion produced some measure of benign neglect.

Ballard and Berger theorized and built SEEK to empower teachers, to allow them to experiment with creative approaches, and to shield them (at least for a while) from any conservative backlash. Neither Berger nor Ballard knew anything about how to teach writing, but they knew that “writing was the key to the SEEK program. The writing program was the essence of it” (Ballard 2014, p. 7). Every single 1965 SEEK student took a stretched SEEK version of the mainstream writing class, says Ballard, because “everything else was secondary” (2015, September 2). Berger knew that “remedial courses taught in a narrow context, are usually the most deadening of courses” and he believed that placing students into fully remedial coursework was a failed approach that survived only due to colleges’ “vacuousness or rigidity” (Berger, 1969-70, p.4). Ballard also recognized “the intrinsic worth of the students’ own thoughts and writing, no matter how ungrammatically expressed. This cannot be a gratuitous and patronizing act of kindness, for the Black student brings with him both a creativity and a knowledge of the human condition unduplicable by white middle-class students” (1973, p. 98). Ballard and Berger believed in the SEEK students and the SEEK teachers.

This combined support from SEEK and neglect by the English department empowered the original seven SEEK lecturers to shape their own writing pedagogies. I have (so far) recovered only fragmentary records and recollections of their actual teaching practices. Temporary teachers often change jobs; I don’t find Byron or Sticht in any City College faculty
lists before 1966 when they joined SEEK; it looks as if Sticht left after one year and Byron left after three (Bulletin, 1967; 1968; 1969; 1970). As lecturers they were not paid to publish; the college did not preserve their papers; they rarely reported to or corresponded with the presidents or deans whose papers were routinely archived. I have no record of Sticht’s actual teaching. And it is possible that all the SEEK teachers performed at least some of their oppositional classroom practices sub rosa—although Bambara, Christian and Gayle soon became public critics of their own department and college.

The fragments I have assembled so far paint a picture of a creative and collaborative teaching circle rather than a fixed writing program—operating within the goals of Berger and Ballard’s larger SEEK program: 1) to recognize both the scars carried by students as well as their tremendous abilities, insights and potential; 2) to both challenge and support students to prepare them to succeed in the larger college; and 3) to develop collaborative, creative and successful pedagogies and practices. In these small writing classes, students could bond with and open up to their teachers. Francee Covington recalls: “you felt that you could tell your instructors Barbara Christian, Addison Gayle, Toni Cade of course, anything that was happening with you, because you had established a rapport…. So even if you didn’t open up in… the formal counseling sessions you were able to get counseling” (Covington, 2015, June 8, pp. 5-6). When Marvina White struggled during her first year, she remembers: “it became clear that my performance in the classroom was suffering as a result of the ways in which I was having to manage life at home” (White, 2015, January 27, p. 5). White’s SEEK counselor Betty Rawls and Christian joined forces: “Betty and Barbara decided that they needed to get in touch with my parents to tell them that this opportunity… was going to be lost if they kept insisting that I do all of the things they wanted me to do at home” (p. 5). Gayle had a reputation among SEEK students as an
“outstanding, effective and caring teacher” (Norment, 2009, p. xii). Covington remembers that Gayle “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…” (2015, June 8, p. 7).

Volpe’s English Department in 1965 reasserted an official, grammar-centric writing pedagogy, enforced by high-stakes grammar exams, and supplemented by study of essays and literature written by white, mostly male authors. But Bambara, Christian and Gayle soon ignored, subverted or openly revolted against grammar instruction, high-stakes exams, and the exclusion or distorted analysis of black writers.

**Tony Penale’s Enthusiastic, Supportive Basic Skills Approach (1965-1967)**

Henry Arce grew up in Spanish Harlem in the early 1950s; within his family, he learned to speak and read only Spanish until he went to kindergarten. In September of 1966, he entered City College as a SEEK student and took Penale’s SEEK English One class. Arce’s other English teachers had labeled him “awkward” (Arce, 2016, June 9, p. 1). During his school years, Arce felt he “never really mastered the grammatical part of English” (2016, June). Penale used a grammar workbook and gave quizzes. But

He had a masterful knowledge of English grammar and was able to translate it in a way that made it exciting. He taught it to us with a special mastery and joy. I remember he taught us about 26 different verb tenses. Penale started my love for English;…. He had fervor, energy and vibrancy. Penale would run across the front of the room challenging and encouraging students. He was manic in his quest to show students we did well, telling us “You got it! You got it!” It was just what we needed because we were so jaded and fearful about mastering English. Penale broke the mold and broke the fear (p. 1).
More importantly, Penale helped Arce understand that his formal English was actually both correct and sophisticated: “The way Penale taught me verb tenses helped me bridge Spanish to English. Penale brought out the richness of the language…. He showed me that my speech patterns were formal and correct—not awkward as my other English teachers had called them. Penale made me feel good about who I was, that I was not awkward” (p. 1).

Richard Goldstone, an English department assistant professor in the late 1960s, later eulogized Penale as a “legendary” and “extraordinary” writing teacher. “Years after he retired, people would still talk about those methods that he used and devices he thought up to get [students] to learn parts of speech and syntax” (Charlton, 1996, March 22). During the semester, Arce hurt his leg in a lacrosse accident; he took a medical leave and didn’t complete Penale’s course. After graduating in 1973, Arce pursued a career in civil service. Then he earned his masters degree and became a primary school English and math teacher. Now, Arce recalls Penale as “the model for me of a great teacher, the kind of teacher I wish I could be” (2016, June 9, p. 1).

**Toni Cade Bambara’s Critical, Student-Centered Inquiry Model (1966-1968)**

Years later, Bambara described a “writing/thinking exercise” she assigned to her first-year SEEK students. She asked them to remember the first time the mention of Africa or slavery made them “hot in the face” with embarrassment, and then, to remember the first time the mention of “Africa, of Black, made your neck long and your spine straight…” (1983, pp. 56-57). Bambara asked the students to list all the crucial things that happened to move them “from hot face to tall spine” and then write “a short story, script, letter, essay, poem [to] make that experience of change available to all the young brothers and sisters on your block” (p. 57). Bambara remembered that this assignment produced days of late night phone calls from students.
as they struggled with notes, outlines, rough drafts, cut-downs, editing and searches for metaphors: “Ah, but what wonderfully lean and brilliant pieces they produced. And what they taught themselves and each other in that process of sifting and sorting, dumping and streamlining, tracing their own process of becoming” (p. 57).

In 1966, Francee Covington’s first-year writing teacher was Bambara: it was just marvelous. She was excited about teaching…. and had this wealth of knowledge and had seen the world and interpreted the world for herself and was helping us to get the skills to do the same thing…. And all of us as students being excited, sharing ideas, writing ideas down, getting feedback, and the feedback was constant and it was positive…. And Toni Cade looking at my work and giving me such positive reinforcement led us to be great friends (Covington, 2015, June 8, p. 6).

When Bambara published her 1970 The Black Woman, An Anthology, she included Covington’s essay, “Are the revolutionary techniques employed in The Battle of Algiers applicable to Harlem?” (Covington, 1970, pp. 313-322). When Covington launched a SEEK student newspaper in April of 1968, Bambara served as its faculty adviser and contributed her own literacy narrative—in which she catalogued her many disappointments with schools that ignored her questions and deadened her intellectual curiosity. Bambara ended with a discussion of her own teaching and her SEEK students:

As any teacher can tell you, the classroom is unpredictable country. You wander into a soggy pasture lecturing to stones. You tread lightly over a mined field. Often under fire. Frequently out of it. The mind blasted. The mind turned on. What turns me on these days are the very particular students in this program. They have a pretty good idea why they’re
here, of what they want to talk about, of what they need to find out, and what they wish to
fight about, of what they’d like to reject. (1968, April 25, p. 4).

Lauding those students who had become “skilled and therefore liberated” and were now making
demands for “experimental curriculums,” Bambara concluded that her childhood dreams of
school as a place of meaningful inquiry might yet be possible (p. 4).

**Christian Listens and Questions (1966-68)**

Marvina White’s first college class was Christian’s 1966 summer enrichment course:
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; we listened
to her give us … [a] brief lecture/discussion starter[— it was] exciting as she walked
around the room talking to us, looking us in our [eyes]” (White, 2015, January 15, p. 3).

To White, Christian’s course was the perfect introduction to college:

the whole experience was just one of human beings engaging with ideas…. she
responded to specific ideas and thoughts I had about the books… that made me feel like I
was having a conversation with her about my thoughts. I had never had that experience
before…. and actually in this class there were 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 (pp. 3-4).

Francee Covington remembers Christian as an “amazing,” powerful listener who probed and
developed her students’ ideas:
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 how does that relate to this?” “Okay, are you going to mention this as well… or… take a different stand?” (Covington 2015, June 8, p. 6).

Eugenia Wiltshire also remembers Christian’s ability to draw out complex connections:
I was just in awe of the amount of knowledge [Barbara Christian] had: about literature, about authors that I never heard of, about language. She could go back and forth from literature to poetry and… it was just absolutely amazing. And from her I learned that there was a larger scope to literature and knowledge than I had really ever thought about (Wiltshire 2015, November 20, p. 7).

Bambara’s “write, write, write” replaces basic skills (1965-1968)
Penale was called both the SEEK English “coordinator” and “director”; but he seems to have coordinated far more than he directed. Volpe described Penale and Bambara as partners from 1965 to 1967: “For the next two years or so, they formed the nucleus of a team of special teachers who… were fully committed to discovering the best possible way to reach and teach this new type of student” (Volpe, 1972, p. 773). Penale’s pedagogy was conservative, using direct grammar instruction and quizzes. (Indeed, Volpe may have chosen Penale because he was a gifted grammar teacher who would focus on sentence mechanics.)

But Bambara told Ballard she wanted her students to “write, write, write” (Ballard, 2015, September 2). Berger recalled that in Fall 1965, the SEEK English teachers (presumably Bambara and Christian) questioned teaching only direct grammar. Instead, they “insisted that actual writing should be done and [that] perhaps minority literature should be introduced in order...
to stimulate the students to write” (Berger, 1969-70, p. 4). By the summer of 1966, Christian was already teaching writing about black literature with no direct grammar instruction (White, 2015, January 27, pp. 3-4). Francee Covington took English classes with Christian, Bambara and Gayle, beginning in 1966. None were grammar classes. Rather, Covington remembers them as “rigorous training” that enabled the SEEK students to enter the mainstream college “full of confidence… that we were ready” (Covington, 2015, June 8, p. 6). The SEEK English courses were a: “lot of work, but very well worth the effort to have what 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” (Covington, 2015, June 8, p. 6).

Eugenia Wiltshire recalls that “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 2015, November 20, p. 7). The focus was rhetorical: “you had to… support your position…. Whether it’d be verbally or on paper… and be able to get the skills necessary to really lay out your ideas, your opinions of how things are and how things should be” (Covington, 2015, June 8, p. 7).

In Fall, 1966, the SEEK English teachers added some SEEK sections of English Five—extending the SEEK writing course sequence for some students to three semesters. Gayle labeled the three English Five sections he taught in 1966-67 as “grammar courses,” although he did not describe his pedagogy (1968a, p. 398). I don’t know how many SEEK English Five sections ran in 1966-67 or how they were taught. (Likely, they varied by instructor as with the other SEEK writing courses.) But many SEEK students were soon placed into English Five sections and a substantial number received J grades that required them to repeat the courses. For example, in the Fall of 1967, there were 98 students in SEEK English Two classes and 76 earned passing
grades. There were 113 students in SEEK English One classes and 90 earning passing grades. There were 115 students in SEEK English Five classes, but only 75 earning passing grades (Ballard, 1968, August 22, App. II). Given the large number of unsuccessful grades, some SEEK students who were placed into English Five needed four or five semesters to complete their required writing classes (Arce, 2016, June 9, p. 2).

But Ballard remembers the overall emerging SEEK writing pedagogy as student-centered, individualized and process based—with all copy-editing pushed to the end of the process:

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 both worked 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? But they basically kind of [made] that on the basis of the structure already, of the content that had already come forth from the students (Ballard, 2014, pp. 8-9).

In a 2015 forum at CUNY, 1960s City College SEEK teacher David Henderson also opined: “I think the reason we had this success was because we were reading contemporary literature. We were not marking kids’ papers up with red ink and concerned with grammar and spelling but we
were more interested in their ideas, experiences and for them to express themselves—the main thing."

This shift from beginning with grammar to beginning with writing represented a fundamental challenge to City’s traditional atomized, formalist writing pedagogy that required students to master decontextualized grammar skills and eliminate errors before building fluency and before addressing either content or rhetorical concerns. (Mirsky’s voice pilot offered a similar challenge in some mainstream English One writing courses beginning in the fall of 1967.) For these early SEEK writing teachers, ideas, content and rhetoric became first concerns; grammar was pushed to the end of the writing process.

Challenging a White Canon and the Aesthetics of White Critics (1965 -1969)

As a literature student at City College and UCLA, Gayle complained that he “had been assigned close to five hundred books, not one of which had been written by a Black writer” (Gayle, 1977, p. 116). SEEK teachers urged adding black and Latino literature to SEEK writing courses in 1965-66 and Christian assigned Native Son and Invisible Man in her summer 1966 course (White, 2015, January 27, p. 3). But in the Fall 1966, Gayle launched a public rebellion against the English department. Throughout his three years as a City College SEEK instructor, Gayle repeatedly argued that black creative and critical writers had been ignored, denigrated and misinterpreted by white scholars who wrongly gauged black art through their distorted, myopic, white aesthetics. Borrowing a term from Hoyt Fuller, Gayle began to argue for a new “black aesthetic,” evaluated by black literary critics. Gayle—joined by Bambara and Christian—pursued this campaign in several ways.

In a Fall 1966 SEEK English staff meeting, Gayle asked to add Don Quixote and Herbert Hill’s 1963 anthology, Soon, One Morning: New Writing by American Negroes to Sheridan
Baker’s 1963 The Essayist—the anthology that had been selected by Penale. In a 1968 essay, Gayle mocked Penale and some other SEEK teachers (presumably not Bambara and Christian) who questioned adding the Hill anthology because reading essays by black authors might embarrass black SEEK students or insult other SEEK students (1968a, pp. 397-398). Incensed by his colleague’s biases, Gayle obtained the help of a SEEK counselor to draft a survey for his students; Gayle then reported that the students were all comfortable with the new texts; one freshman, Gayle noted, even urged that black “literature should be brought to the attention of all English classes, no matter what the culture or background of the students” (p. 402).

Gayle’s anger at his colleague’s biases is understandable. But his bitter account also offers a glimpse into this small 1966 teaching circle. As part of the SEEK model, the teachers met together to discuss their teaching and students. Penale proposed an unremarkable reader. Other teachers were already choosing different readers without Penale’s objection, but Gayle’s proposal to add a reader of black writers prompted an awkward discussion among this integrated staff about their biases. After the meeting, two “more diplomatic” black staff members (apparently Bambara and Christian) soon obtained Penale’s approval and Gayle used the added reader in the Spring (pp. 398-400).

Penale and Gayle’s two readers also suggest some pedagogical differences. Gayle didn’t find Penale’s reader to be “a bad text,” but he doubted the readings would provoke “more than superficial interest” from their students (1968a, p. 398). In The Essayist, Baker explained that he has arranged his selected essays to “take the student progressively through the questions of expository writing” (Baker, 1963, p. ix). Each of eleven sections focused on a writing skill:

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thesis, organization, argument tactics in middle paragraphs, holding reader interest in middle paragraphs, introductions and conclusions, sentence style, word choice, narrative, irony, and evidence and voice (pp. xi-xiii). Suggested writing prompts at the end of each section called mostly for exposition. But Baker also infused rhetorical concerns: he urged students to consider audience and to search for implied arguments. Overall, Penale’s reader choice was interesting mainly in that it contained no literature.

By contrast, Hill’s *Soon, One Morning* centered on the related themes of American racism and the artistic struggles of black artists—a critical, politicized model of aesthetics. But Hill’s reader also followed the old writing about literature model, with a short section of essays and letters (pp. 21-136), followed by a longer fiction section (pp. 139-553), and then poetry (pp. 557-617). Gayle also added *Don Quixote*, further pushing his writing classes into City’s traditional literature model; his huge reading syllabus suggests a focus on reading over writing. (SEEK students received free books, so he could add texts without worrying about their costs.)


In the Spring of 1967, Gayle organized and led a Spring 1967 public City College lecture series on black literature in Finley Hall. Penale invited Gallagher, who expressed support and interest, but could not attend (Gallagher, 1967, February 20). The series was planned to include five talks by Gayle, and one each by Bambara, Christian and James Emanuel (Announcement, 1967, February). Bambara also obtained an announcement in *The Amsterdam News* (Slack, 1967, February 25). The following year, the SEEK teachers scheduled six more similar lectures, adding some Puerto Rican literature (Shaughnessy, 1967, September 22). An expanded series began in the Spring of 1969, but several events were cut after the students began their protests for racial justice (Cook, 1969, June, pp. 6-7).
Gayle Attacks Volpe and Hamalian’s Anthology (1967-1969)


Gayle criticized the editors for including Mailer; but he was more troubled by their inclusion of John Fischer’s 1962 “What the Negro Needs Most: A First Class Citizen’s Council,” which Gayle called “a serious error in judgment” (1967, p. 6). There, Fischer advised black people to improve themselves in order to end white prejudice and segregation, which Fischer asserted was based “with some reason” (1963, p. 241) on black people’s propensity for violent crime, sloppy and lazy home maintenance which led to community blight (p. 242-43), poor community citizenship (p. 243), and “casual attitudes… about sex and about their family responsibilities” (p. 244).

Again, Gayle’s anger is understandable and his argument was powerful. Together, Volpe and Hamalian used the Mailer and Fischer essays to create a reading unit on racism written only by white racists.

Gayle doubled-down on his criticism of Volpe and Hamalian in the same 1968 article where he attacked Penale and some SEEK writing teachers over their resistance to the Hill
reader. Gayle concluded that “the consensus of the college and the society is the same. Presumably, those most capable of writing about Negroes are whites” (p. 400). By then, Hamalian was one of the few English faculty who had volunteered to teach a SEEK course; but Gayle did not relent; he republished his 1968 article in his 1969 Black Expression anthology—again publicly attacking Volpe, Penale, Hamalian, and other SEEK writing teachers.


Somehow while teaching a full load of SEEK writing courses, the angry, driven Gayle also produced an astounding body of critical writing. “Two years after returning to New York, I had published over thirty articles, one short story, and had edited an anthology…. …” (1977, p. 117). In Norment’s view, throughout “the sixties and seventies, Gayle was widely recognized as the academic leader and one of the architects…of the Black Arts and Aesthetics movement (2009, p. xii). Gayle’s first anthology, Black Expression: Essays By and About Black Americans in the Creative Arts was published in March of 1969 and it went through four printings by July of 1970. Gayle included five new essays in the collection, three of which were written by Bambara, Christian, and their fellow SEEK instructor David Henderson (1969, pp. iii, vi).

All this work directly focused critical attention on black creative and critical writers and their uses in college classrooms. Gayle, Bambara and the other SEEK teachers were also building themselves into a formidable new scholarly community. Asked to name her mentors in a 1983 interview, Bambara cited Gayle first—crediting him with pushing her to assemble her 1970 *Black Woman* anthology and also getting her a contract to publish her 1971 *Tales and Short Stories for Black Folks* (1983, p. 64).

From 1964 to 1970, Volpe reshaped the English department from the largely egalitarian (white and male) community of teacher scholars that Johnson had led for two decades into a new three-tiered system: a privileged upper-tier of mostly white, male professors with Ph.D. credentials, an expanding lower-tier of temporary lecturers, and a segregated sub-division of SEEK lecturers. Although Volpe often praised the dedication of the SEEK lecturers, he also deeply disdained them. In the same 1972 article in which Volpe lauded his own role in supporting the SEEK program, he also discussed labor issues within English departments.\(^4^4\) Volpe observed that City College lecturers before 1970 had been a “non-privileged migrant labor force…. kept… disenfranchised, mobile and inexpensive” (1972, p. 776). He mused whether “one year of post B.A. study of literature is a sufficient preparation for college teaching?” (p. 776) and labeled all non-Ph.D. teachers as merely “para-professionals” (p. 776). Volpe posited that a lecturer could “never be more than a second class citizen” and that “composition… [is] teaching that is obviously inferior because it is entrusted to an inferior” (p. 775).

By promoting and supporting each other’s critical and creative work and by openly challenging Volpe’s (and the department’s) scholarship, critical judgment, and credentials—

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\(^{4^4}\) Volpe attempted an ironic tone, but he was clearly annoyed that the large lecturer force he had created then quickly voted to unionize itself and limit the power of department chairs; I take his words at face value here (1972, pp. 774-75).
Gayle, Bambara, Christian and others publicly rejected the largely white male professorate’s elitist and exclusionary assumptions of superiority. They built a new professional network that produced competing theories, essays, creative writing and scholarly books—and that competed for intellectual dominance with the old guard.

**Bambara, Gayle and Christian Demand a Black Studies Program (1967-1969)**

Gayle, Bambara and Christian’s challenges to the white canon at City College quickly effected some changes. The Department issued a press release announcing a Fall 1967 “course on Negro poetry” to be taught by Emmanuel (Release, 1967, March 13). By fall 1969, English electives included Black Literature, Black Poetry, Black Drama, Black Fiction and Literature of peoples of African Descent (Bulletin, 1969, pp. 73-74). In 1968, Emmanuel and Gross published their own 600-page anthology of black writers, *Dark Symphony: Negro Literature in America*. The publication of a black writer anthology by two City College English professors responded to Gayle’s exclusion arguments. Emmanuel and Gross wrote their commentary in blended voice and largely conceded Gayle’s arguments about white critics—even as Gross partnered in their critique: “Until recently Americans have viewed the Negro through the eyes of white authors. This perspective has an interest of its own, but…often [comes] close to caricature [and obscures] his complexity, diversity and essential humanity” (p. ix).

But Bambara was not impressed with these new courses or with Gross’s credentials as a black literature critic. She scoffed:

> A brief glance at the bulletin will reveal that the English Department is still dipping out of the old Anglo-Saxon bag, the snobbism and racism of which has its roots in the Jamestown settlement….The infusion of one or two black literature courses in their curricula does nothing at all to the deeply entrenched notion that Anglo-Saxon literature...
is The Literature—especially if those courses are taught by people like Ted Gross who handles the Negro poetry courses on occasion…” (Bambara, 1969, February 14, p. 4).

Bambara then attacked Gross for having denied that Richard Wright was a major American writer (p. 4). Gayle repeated the attack in a 1969 article (1969b, p. 105).

During the fall of 1968, Bambara proposed a new Center for Black and Latino Studies and described eight possible courses. In February 1969, The Observation Post student newspaper reprinted her proposal and credited Bambara as “the motivating force behind the creation” of this new center (1969, February 14, p. 5). Bambara even suggested course teachers, including Gayle, Betty Rawls, and Francee Covington (p. 5). Christian wrote that the idea for a black and Puerto Rican studies program had been raised by students first in the fall of 1968 and had gradually expanded into a demand for a broader “School of Urban and Third World Studies” in the five student demands in Spring, 1969 (Christian, 1969 June). Bambara also made it clear that the student demands at City College were not unusual, arguing that “at least 90% of the several hundred rebellions” at colleges and high schools since 1964 were driven by dissatisfaction with curriculum, especially “the casual absence or deliberate overlooking of the role the African and Afro-American tradition plays in our history, our art, our culture in general” (1969, February 14, p. 4).

Again the SEEK lecturers provoked concessions from the English department. Volpe hired Wilfred Cartey, at full professor rank, at the end of 1968 to study and propose a Black Studies program; Christian assisted Cartey as the Assistant Director of Black and Puerto Rican Studies (CCNY, 1969; Christian, 1969 June). But CUNY’s Board rejected their plan; City College’s new President Joseph Copeland called Cartey “shiftless” and replaced him; the English department also withdrew their support (Van Gelder, 1969, September 20; Gayle, 1971, pp. 56-
City College replaced Cartey and Christian’s “detailed and academically-demanding proposal” for a “School of Urban and Ethnic Studies” with a two-course program (Washington, Rich & Birembaum, 1969, September 29).

**Gayle Admires SEEK’s “Quiet Revolution” (1968-71)**

Despite Gayle’s running battle with the English department, he did not doubt the sincerity of Berger or the important impact of the SEEK program itself. In another 1968 article, Gayle praised Berger and Levy’s SEEK as a “quiet revolution.” Observing that most white scholars focused their critiques on racism in public schools rather than their own colleges, Gayle lauded his friend Berger as a “visionary” with “relentless drive [and] almost messianic dedication to one of America’s most pressing problems” (1968b, p. 307). Gayle described Berger as always speaking quietly with a “resonant voice showing traces of a foreign accent” (p. 308). Gayle quoted Berger as denying any revolutionary label, but as modestly seeing SEEK as “the right thing to do” in a system where “educationally we’re betraying a lot of kids because of rigid standards and, perhaps, out of date admissions criteria…” (p. 308). For most SEEK students, Gayle asserted, this was the first time they would be treated as students: young men and women having the potential to learn.

Pedagogically, people would believe in them, be interested in them, agree with them that the stereotypes had been constructed out of ignorance and neglect, that the segment of society which had relegated them to its sewage heap was a segment without compassion, without knowledge of their true worth, without, even, respect for their humanity (p. 306). In 1971, Gayle again lauded Berger, Levy and SEEK, even as he excoriated the racism within City College and its English Department and mocked Kenneth Clark, “the apostle of
integration,” for not doing more to support SEEK and the integration of his own campus (1971, pp. 54-55).

The SEEK English Enrichment Courses (Summer 1968)

Starting in 1966, the SEEK English teachers ran summer enrichment programs. Christian saw them “as a means of experimenting with different techniques of involving the students in writing” (Christian, 1968, Fall, p. 17). In a 1968 SEEK “Report on the Summer Seminar,” Byron, Gayle, Henderson, Christian and Bambara wrote rich and detailed reports of their actual teaching practices. The report also listed the meeting days and times of the fifteen sections and rosters for each class of the summer program’s 138 students.45

In June of 1968, the City College students and teachers, like all Americans, were struggling to process the overwhelming events of the previous three months. On March 31st, Lyndon Johnson, mired in the lost cause of the Viet Nam war, announced he would not run for reelection. On April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis. Although Mayor Lindsey defused tensions in New York City, King’s murder ignited protests across the country. In late April, Columbia University students and other protesters occupied administration buildings and took three administrators hostage for three days. Throughout the spring, worker strikes and student protests erupted worldwide. On June 5, 1968, Robert Kennedy was assassinated in Los Angeles.

In this devastating time, the 1968 summer teachers faced extraordinary teaching challenges. David Henderson tried to teach two creative writing class sections, using a variety of creative devices: journaling, telling and then writing down stories, and interviewing family members; he used selections from only two books, Burton’s Arabian Nights and Lester’s Look

45 (Shaughnessy, 1968, Fall, pp. 35-39). The 1968 Report also included a “General Comment” and a teaching report by Mina Shaughnessy which I discuss in Chapter Ten.
Out Whitey! Black Power’s Gon Get Your Mama! But Henderson was clearly frustrated: “I feel that we have bitten off too much…. many of my students were unable to keep up with the assignments” (Henderson, 1968, Fall, p. 26).

The more experienced SEEK teachers adopted distinct approaches. Byron taught a demanding reading list, mostly ancient Greek and Shakespeare plays, and assigned frequent writing. Gayle focused on reading and discussing modern novels. Both men offered traditional, structured literature classes that proceeded according to lesson plans, fixed readings and prompted essay assignments. Christian assigned only three books, which she used to inspire informal student writing. She asked her students to look inward to tell and examine their own stories. Cade’s 1968 critical rhetoric classes were the most free-form and the most overtly shaped by the terrible moment. Both Christian and Bambara de-centered themselves by listening, questioning and encouraging students to use writing to pursue their own questions, ideas and projects.

**Byron’s Visual, Graphic Approach to The Traditional Canon (Summer 1968)**

Having been told by his students that they felt “‘weak’ in background reading,” and were unable to understand the classical allusions “that continually [barraged] them” in different classes, Byron’s teaching goal in his summer course was to build their confidence by offering this classical foundation (Byron, 1968, Fall, p. 5). His daunting reading list included two reference books (Seary & Story’s 1962, *The Study of English: A Handbook for Students* and Herman Wechsler’s 1961, *Gods and Goddesses in Art and Legend*), three short stories, *Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and eleven plays: two by Aeschylus, three by Sophocles, three by Euripides, and three by Shakespeare.
Byron also assigned a lot of writing: five main essays as well as eight “critical commentaries” on the plays (pp. 4-8). He cited his “character switching” essay as particularly successful. (“How would Medea have acted were she in the position of being Othello’s wife?”) (p. 7). Byron’s pedagogical innovation within this traditional and demanding course was to employ a “visual, graphic, [and] sensory” approach which he had developed in other courses using Leavitt & Sohn’s 1964 *Stop, Look, and Write: Effective Writing Through Pictures* (p. 6, n. 10). Weschler’s 110 page *God and Goddesses* served Byron’s goal of quickly building cultural literacy using images: it provided short simple statements of Greek and Roman myths and 64 photos of European paintings depicting those myths. Byron supplemented *Gods and Goddesses* with his own supportive materials, including a Greek stage diagram (pp. 6-7).

Overall, Byron reported excitement and wide ranging discussions; he believed he had even recruited two new English majors (pp. 5-8). But he also suggested that some students had fallen behind, concluding with the “obvious point” that the students who did the work “reaped the greatest benefit from this six week summer seminar” (p. 8).

**Gayle’s Modern Literature Seminar With Skills Tutoring (Summer 1968)**

In Gayle’s two 1968 SEEK summer courses, his goals were to introduce “first year college students to literature in a new and different way… to discover the weaknesses and strengths of present writing skills, to introduce new concepts of writing, and to afford the student an opportunity to develop his ideas through writing by using literature as a source and guide”

46 Byron didn’t report how he used *Stop, Look and Write* in his other SEEK writing courses. His use of visual aids suggested invention exercises and visual rhetorics. But Leavitt & Sohn aimed their book at grade school or middle school students, with frequent references to “young writers.” Its series of writing exercises bridged from photographs but never moved beyond stylish description and narration. The editors stated their purpose was to “provide a method whereby both students and adults can learn something about the art and power of observation” (1964, p. 8).
(Gayle, 1968, Fall, p. 24). Gayle focused on comparing naturalistic and existential literature, assigning four novels: Wright’s Native Son, Dostoyevsky’s Crime and Punishment, Malraux’s Man’s Fate, and Williams’ The Man Who Cried I Am, as well as Thomas’s memoir Down These Mean Streets (p. 24). The bulk of the class was spent on the readings; Gayle assigned only two prompted papers. The first prompt was “Bigger Thomas and Raskolnikov are candidates for the presidency of the United States. What would be their approaches to the Vietnam War, poverty, and civil rights?” (p 24). Gayle conferred with students about their first papers, and reviewed their grammatical errors. His second writing prompt was: “Compare and contrast May in Mans Fate with Sonia in Crime and Punishment.” Gayle used this second set of papers to confirm the students’ progress in sentence mechanics, reporting that the errors he reviewed in the conferences mostly did not recur in the second paper (p. 25).

Christian’s Process Approach Builds Fluency and Confidence (Summer 1968)

In her 1968 report, Christian explained that her “hypothesis for this summer was that most of the students suffer from a lack of awareness of the importance and relevance of their own lives” (Christian, 1968, Fall, p. 17). Her teaching goal in her three classes was to help students to “see, believe, and respond to the depth and subtlety” of their own worlds (p. 17). She assigned only three books, using each to begin conversation that inspired student writing. An eviction scene in Ellison’s Invisible Man resonated because the students “had all seen evictions;” their discussion generated “a great deal of writing.” Some began to keep and share journals with Christian. The grammar was terrible; but she ignored the errors: “as far as I was concerned, the first step had been taken. Some of them were writing on their own and derived a great deal of pleasure from it” (p. 17). From these journals, some students wrote revised pieces, wanting “to perfect this new ability;” they also shared this voluntary writing with Christian (p. 17).
Indeed, Christian’s report does not say that she ever assigned any specific writing; rather she guided and induced her students to write a great deal. A master teacher, Christian bridged out from the readings and discussions to encourage students to explore their new ideas in various forms, some of which eventually became revised, finished pieces.

When Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and LeRoi Jones’ *Blues People* opened up discussions and student interest in blues, Christian brought in records and they listened to work songs, blues and jazz together; these discussions about music led students to write about their associations with music in their lives (p.18). Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* provoked excited discussions about “the black aesthetic, the War in Vietnam, Afros, the relationship of black men to black women…..” (p. 18). These discussions eventually focused on Cleaver’s “eyes” vignette. The students studied it closely and then wrote their own vignettes, copying Cleaver’s “street language and flowing rhetorical style” to “get at the core of an emotion” (p 18).

Christian attached four student essays to her two-page summary. Consistent with Christian’s teaching goals, these student essays were all drawn from the student’s personal experience. The spelling and mechanics varied; but all were carefully crafted pieces. One student recounted how a song reminded her of her first romance. A second student described the pain of watching a struggling family break-up as the wife load everything into a U haul— except for her two sons and husband, whom she left behind. Another stopped using a pressing comb to straighten his hair and recounted the differing reactions from his girlfriend and a male buddy. A fourth described a lonely woman sitting on a park bench who burned her purse in a nearby fire— and imagined her as a high priestess enacting a rite of self-liberation (pp. 19-23).
Christian concluded that “we had just gotten started [but] the jump to more rigorous writing could be made in a few weeks, [and] some though not all of the students had begun to overcome their fear of writing” (p.18).

Bambara’s “Two-Way Learning” Critical Rhetoric Courses (Summer 1968)

Bambara used student feedback from previous courses to shape her three summer classes, which “tended to focus on Black literature, contemporary preoccupations, techniques of argument, and free form writing assignments” (Bambara, 1968, Fall, p. 10). Bambara also assigned New York newspapers and sent students to “good libraries and book stores;” she gave them her home phone number (p. 10).

Bambara’s incoming first-year students asked for help writing book reviews, some “magic tricks” of grammar to defend against “ruthless red pencil marks,” and some academic vocabulary. But she did not teach student genres, grammar or jargon (p. 12). Instead, Bambara began with Jones’ “Cuba Libre” essay from his Home, which led the students to a theme of “lies” that they revisited throughout the course. Bambara assigned response papers and private journals in addition to class notes (p. 13). She observed that the first batch of papers were “mechanically weak, flabby in content, [and bore] little resemblance to the sophistication, wit, sharpness of the class discussions” (p. 13). Cade saw fragments, misspellings, wrong parts of speech, faulty subject and verb agreement, “ambiguous pronouns, and manufactured conjunctions” (p. 13). But she did not correct them. Instead, she pursued the students’ ideas. Bambara abandoned a planned session on a short story when a television documentary led students into a discussion of brainwashing (p. 13). When a discussion about lies revealed the students felt disconnected from “the youth” they read about in the media, Bambara again put aside her lesson plan and “we
talked about the movement of the young, filling up all six blackboards with names of individuals, organizations, magazines, newspapers, books, slogans” (p. 15).

The other SEEK lecturers were careful to present themselves well in these reports to their bosses. But Bambara’s report was often self-critical, digressive, and uncorrected. Over seven single-spaced pages, she doubted herself and dwelled on her missed opportunities. She described her incoming-student courses as “not particularly fruitful” (p. 12). She struggled to hold their interest and draw back absentees, talking to students in her office and by phone and moving some class sessions to the cafeteria or her office (pp. 12-13). In the end, Bambara believed her incoming students had 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 regretted that she did not seize on the “lies’ theme more quickly and assign papers about it “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).

Bambara’s class for returning first-years, sophomores and juniors, began meeting in June from 6:00 to 9:00 pm Wednesday evenings at the SEEK dorm (Shaughnessy, 1968, Fall, p. 35). After offering ideas drawn from previous classes and some reading lists, Bambara asked these students to craft the course themselves. They chose the theme of “Colonialism, Neo-Colonialism and Liberation” and mapped out readings beginning with Fanon’s Wretched of the Earth; Bambara ordered the books (p. 10). In addition to twelve City College students, Bambara allowed “a rotating group of eight or nine students from other campuses” to attend as well (p. 10). Bambara also urged them to read “every newspaper sold in New York” as a way to study “rhetoric related to colonialism and liberation” (p. 10).
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.” And so, this was “a course with few limits, no specific end, personal, often agonizing—without a doubt the most difficult to ‘teach’ for there can be no ‘control’ in the usual pedagogical sense, and without a doubt the most worthwhile kind of educational adventure for it lends itself to two-way learning” (pp. 10-11). Although Bambara at first added fiction to the readings, she noticed students lost interest quickly in Malraux’s *Man’s Fate* and Paton’s *Cry the Beloved Country*. She asked her students why and they said they were “tired of living through fiction” (p. 11). She then studied the teaching notes she’d “kept over the years” and realized she saw this was a repeated pattern “in these times that demand vital and total participation. The wary student finds sanctuary in literature; the alert student prefers to respond to writings produced by his fellow classmates” (pp. 11-12).

Each three-hour evening class began with students summarizing and critiquing the readings leading to far-ranging and “often quite heated” discussions. Then, students demonstrated new rhetorical skills “(the ability to persuade, refute, recruit, mobilize to action, cool out, dissuade)” or reported on their independent research or used “the group as a sounding board” for new positions they had developed (p. 11). Some classes ran long. Four students once remained behind “to discuss the ideology and methods of many of the New Left factions” (p. 12). The final class meeting ran for five hours “because one student needed ‘uninterrupted time to rap’” and delivered a two-and-a-half hour dissertation that synthesized “at least 80%” of the course themes:

the irrationality of logic, the impossibility of objectivity, the stultifying effects of the English language, the masking role of reason which makes mental gymnastics pass for
reality, the defects in Black nationalism, the holes in Fanon, the criminality of education, the paternalism of the Seek Program,…point omega in one’s consciousness, the square people versus the globular people, the evolution of the Black man, the foolishness of ‘things are getting better,’ the limited role of regular teachers as opposed to real mentors (p. 11).

Most of the writing in this course was informal, although students eventually submitted “random musings from their journals… scenarios for films…. dialogues, poems, notes for compositions [and] blueprints for courses” (p. 12). One student compiled a directory of foundations that might support establishing “a ‘real’ college within the mock college” (p 16).

Again, Bambara’s self-assessment was candid and mixed: “no one at the end could state with any clarity or precision what we had accomplished or left undone,… the final departure left us drained and in some inexplicable state of frustration, convinced on the one hand that something got done, on the other that nothing got done,…” (p. 12). Yet she pointed to four tangible products. A student committee was exploring the classes of the dissident Experimental College, apparently hoping to import it to City College. Some students were corresponding with the Saul Alinsky Institute to develop a new City College course in community organization. Some students set up a new literary, critical and political journal. And some students invited speakers to give African and African-American history lectures at the SEEK dorm (p. 12).

Bambara ended her report by examining her teaching philosophy, finding herself at a loss to explain her own approach:

I’m aware that there is very little academic distance, that an unreasonable amount of energy and participation is demanded of the student and an enormous amount of seemingly divergent material is tolerated. I think a good teacher provokes rather than
assuages, raises questions rather than provides answers, allows the students to discover techniques rather than teaches them, and equips the student with skills so that he can sever ties with the teacher quickly and teach himself…. The aim of my stumble trial and error approach, then, is to make the classroom unsafe, to bomb the hiding student out of his corner, to blast the insulating walls down, to nimbly take the most rash and contradictory positions so that students do not feel they have to preach the party line to pass the course, to demand that each student participate in the content, direction, and goals of the course, and to provide the kind of relationship in which the student will always feel free to terminate or to change, to walk out of the room and work on his project, to do advance work on material he feels is more important than what is offered in the classroom (p. 15).

**Rejecting High-Stakes Tests in Favor of Holistic Teacher Assessment (1965-67)**

Even as the department created mandatory high-stakes grammar tests for English One, it appears that Bambara, Gayle and Christian simply refused to use them. Covington remembers assessment in her SEEK writing courses:

> We 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 [any] 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 (2015, p. 7).

Eugenia Wiltshire, looking now at the May 1967 Departmental Exam, says she never saw “this poor excuse for a test” (English One Final Exam, 1967, Spring; Wiltshire 2016, January 12).
Marvina White also says there were no final exams in her SEEK writing courses; she remembers no grammar tests of any kind (White 2016, January 12).

Instead, SEEK course grades and advancement were controlled by teachers, in conversation with each other, with the SEEK counselors, and possibly with Penale. Beginning in about 1967, the English teachers also submitted short, narrative mid-term assessments of each student. In surviving fall 1970 versions of these reports, teachers offered short assessments of each student, in varying styles and with different focus points. Teachers retained substantial agency over grading and many offered thoughts and recommendations about future course assignments (Mid-term reports, 1970, Fall).

**Volpe Chooses a Second SEEK Coordinator (1967)**

In 1966, Volpe warned his colleagues that he only wanted to be chairman of a first-rate department, even as he began to doubt whether they were one (Volpe, 1966, April, pp. 4-5). From 1965 to 1969, Bambara, Christian and Gayle led the SEEK writing program to reject the three main focuses of City’s official first year writing pedagogy: 1) focus on basic grammar skills and sentence-errors before writing; 2) high-stakes grammar tests; and 3) a white canon. Under Volpe’s enforced segregation and the Department’s temporary inattention, the SEEK teachers developed into a community of cutting-edge, influential scholars and innovative, sophisticated writing teachers. If the English Department was pre-eminent from 1966 to 1969—it was in large part due to its SEEK lecturers.

But Volpe did not see their value—perhaps because he disdained all non-Ph.D. lecturers as “a migrant labor force” and mere “para-professionals” and all SEEK courses as “remedial” (Volpe, 1972). Instead, Volpe refused to consider any promotions for SEEK lecturers (Volpe, 1972). Instead, Volpe refused to consider any promotions for SEEK lecturers.

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47 (Molloy, 2012, p. 116, 122-23). I have not found any of the 1960s City College course reports. But Mary Soliday has preserved and shared the Fall 1970 mid-term basic writing course reports.
In 1969, Bambara accepted an assistant professor post at Rutgers University’s Livingston College (Holmes, 2014, p. 51), and Gayle accepted an assistant professor post at Baruch—the former “downtown” branch of Volpe’s own department that had become an independent faculty a year earlier.48

In 1965, Volpe chose Penale, a gifted and caring grammar teacher, as his first SEEK coordinator. If Volpe hoped that Penale would enforce City’s error-centric, formalist writing pedagogy, then Penale largely disappointed him. But in the summer of 1967, Penale suffered a heart attack. Volpe could have replaced Penale from among his tenured professors—but Volpe had already segregated the SEEK faculty from the main department. He could have promoted Gayle, Christian or Bambara. All had proved themselves as successful, dedicated SEEK teachers; all were developing substantial academic credentials; Gayle and Bambara were also City College alumni and former Harlem residents.

Volpe wanted to lead a first rate department. It is tempting to imagine what might have been. Volpe could have promoted Bambara, Christian or Gayle to be the SEEK English coordinator in 1967. He could have recognized that they were all doing critically important work and promoted them to tenure track positions. He could have merged the SEEK teachers with the mainstream faculty. Bambara, Christian and Gayle might then have stayed at City College for decades and formed the nucleus of a new activist, teaching and scholarly community. They might have taught the mainstream faculty to better respect and value its new students. They could have aggressively pushed the research of the entire department toward the cutting edge

48 (Norment, 2009, p. xi). By the summer of 1971, all seven of the original seven SEEK English teachers had left City College. Only Christian still taught writing at City in the Fall of 1970 (Fall 1970 Teacher Reports). Having completed her Ph.D., Christian was promoted to Assistant Professor in Fall, 1970 (English Department Newsletter, 1971, March, p. 12). But she left City College after the Spring of 1971 to teach at Berkeley (Christian, 2000, June 27).
critical and creative work that they were already doing and would continue to do. They could have served as a bridge between City College and Harlem and the other black and brown communities around it. They could have continued to shape SEEK and SEEK writing pedagogy, and could have joined Mirksy and Mirriam to develop deeper, better writing pedagogies for the entire college. They might have continued to resist new tests that pointlessly harmed students.

Volpe had a golden opportunity, but he could not or would not see it.

Instead, Volpe chose an outsider to be his second SEEK coordinator: a writing teacher with almost no academic credentials and with no connection to City College, SEEK, or the Harlem community. But she had worked for over a decade at several jobs as an editorial assistant, ghostwriter, and copy-editor. And, unlike Penale, Bambara and Christian, she would prove willing to return SEEK’s writing pedagogy to a focus on what she soon called “the A, B, Cs of correctness.”
Chapter Ten


In 1946, a tall, graceful, 22-year-old aspiring actress drove all night from Illinois to New York City. Mina Shaughnessy (then Mina Pendo) was a miner’s daughter who grew up in the ugly mining town of Lead, South Dakota (Maher, 1997, pp. 1-2). She arrived in Manhattan with a bachelor’s degree from the Speech Department at Northwestern University and dreams of Broadway stardom (Maher, 1997, pp. 1, 29; Emig, 1979, pp. 37-38). But acting roles did not emerge, and a year later, she returned to Illinois to take graduate courses in Bible study at Wheaten College. Without completing that program, Shaughnessy returned to Manhattan, and in the Fall of 1948, she enrolled as a part-time masters student in English literature at Columbia University (Maher, 1997, pp. 30-33).

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Adrienne Rich grew up in a bookish home in Baltimore in the 1930s; her Jewish father was a medical doctor and teacher at Johns Hopkins University; her Episcopal mother was a pianist/composer who became a traditional wife and mother. Rich attended elite private schools; her father groomed her “to be a literary prodigy,” encouraging her to study and write poetry (Fox, 2012, March 28).

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In 1949, Shaughnessy applied for teaching jobs at two high schools—but without her masters’ degree, she was turned down (Maher, 1997, p. 33). Instead she found a part-time teaching job at the National Bible Institute, which, in 1950, renamed itself Shelton College. Shaughnessy finished her masters thesis in June of 1951, an annotated bibliography of seventeenth century literature theses completed by Columbia students during the 1930s (p. 37).
Again she searched, without success, for a full-time teaching position. She settled for a job as a researcher and editorial assistant on a vanity biography project commissioned by John Rockefeller, Junior. Shaughnessy worked on Rockefeller’s biography for four years; she eventually ghost-wrote half of it although she received no authorial credit; it was published in 1956 (pp. 38-42, 54, 67).

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In 1951, Rich was a senior at Radcliffe when W.H. Auden selected her first book of poems, *A Change of World*, for publication in the prestigious Yale younger poets series. After Radcliffe, Rich went to Oxford as a Rhodes scholar but abandoned her studies to travel through Europe. In 1953, two years after graduating from Radcliffe, she married Harvard economics professor Alfred Conrad (Fox, 2012, March 28).

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Also in 1953, Shaughnessy met and married Don Shaughnessy, a Columbia Ph.D. history student. He soon completed his Ph.D. degree. She began to study for her Ph.D., but took only a single course in medieval Latin (Maher, 1997, pp. 51, 53). Shaughnessy traveled to Italy with her husband where he was offered a one-year college teaching job. While there, Mina worked part-time as a copy editor on a memoir. She tried to write adult fiction, but found herself writing children’s poems instead (p. 60). She sent an essay to *The New Yorker*, but it was rejected (p. 66). After the couple returned to New York, they drifted apart. But over the next two decades, they never dissolved their estranged marriage (p. 75).

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In the 1940s Janet Mayes (then Janet Singer) grew up as a “red diaper” baby in Washington Heights in the shadow of the George Washington Bridge, just over two miles from
City College. Her postal clerk father and housewife mother moved the family to Queens where Janet went to middle school. In the late 1950s, she went the High School of Performing Arts in Manhattan and studied as a classical timpanist (Mayes, 2016, June 29, p. 1).

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In 1956, Shaughnessy “applied for scores of college-level teaching positions” without success (Maher, 1997, p. 68). Instead she took a job as a “supervisor of editorial training and assistant to the editor-in-chief” at McGraw Hill, where she worked as an editor and editor trainer for five years, until 1961 (pp. 70, 76). In 1961, still unable to find full-time teaching work, Shaughnessy quit publishing and accepted a part-time job teaching evening classes at Hunter College (p. 76). Determined to obtain full-time teaching work, she began to submit literature essays to journals, but none were accepted. She also began to write poems and children’s stories (p. 78-79). In 1964, Shaughnessy finally landed a full-time instructor job at Hofstra University. For three years, she commuted 90 minutes each way from Manhattan to Hempstead, Long Island (p. 80).

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Although her family discouraged her, Mayes entered Queens College in 1960. Wanting to break free from her parents, she transferred to City College as a sophomore and moved back to Washington Heights. Mayes started as a pre-med student; but she switched to be an English major after assistant professor Rose Zimbardo began to mentor her. After Janet graduated in 1964, she went to Berkeley where she studied Shakespeare and joined anti-war protests (Mayes, 2016, June 29, p. 1).

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Mayes also returned to Manhattan in 1966. She completed a summer teacher training course, and began to teach English at I.S. 88 in Brooklyn. Small, young and shy, Mayes felt unprepared and overwhelmed. Zimbardo suggested that she apply to teach at City College in its new SEEK program. Mayes began to teach SEEK English courses in the Spring of 1967 (Mayes, 2016, June 29).

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By the Spring of 1967, Shaughnessy’s efforts to build her resume finally bore fruit: three of her children’s stories were accepted by *Golden Magazine*; her poem, “Milton” was printed in the *Hofstra Review*; Gerald Willen, her old boss at Hunter College, accepted her essay for inclusion in a critical Henry James edition (Shaughnessy, 1967, April 22; Maher, 1977, p. 82). In early April, Shaughnessy interviewed with Volpe for a full time SEEK lecturer job and he offered it to her on the spot; within a week she accepted (Volpe, 1967, April 10; Shaughnessy, 1967, April 15). Soon after, Penale had a heart attack and Volpe offered Shaughnessy the job of “director” of the SEEK English program. Shaughnessy first visited Penale in the hospital, then accepted the position (Shaughnessy, 1967, June 19).

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After Martin Luther King was assassinated, Rich wanted to do something. She felt “liberal, white guilt” and she regretted that she wasn’t involved in the real life of Manhattan. Through her husband, she contacted Volpe about teaching in SEEK (Rich, 1973, p. 258). Volpe
at first refused to place her “in such an arduous program.” Rather, he offered Rich a job as a poet-in-residence, teaching a single poetry workshop. A handwritten note on Volpe’s letter lists Shaughnessy’s phone numbers—suggesting that Rich called Shaughnessy (Volpe, 1968, April 23). A month later, Volpe wrote again, regretting that Rich had refused his poetry offer, but “delighted by” her desire to teach in SEEK. She would teach one class and Shaughnessy would offer the “necessary information” (Volpe, 1968, May 28).

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Winning Over Volpe (Fall 1967)

On September 22, 1967, Shaughnessy wrote Volpe a letter setting out her initial efforts as SEEK’s new writing program administrator. First, she reassured her new boss that she had straightened out “the crimps and clanks and near breakdowns” of registration and did not need to “bother” him “with the details” (p. 1). She had arranged 24 SEEK writing sections: nine of English Five, eight of English One and seven of English Two—all with fifteen students or less (p. 1). Mayes would handle tutoring and do some tutoring herself—repeating the system from the previous year (p. 1). Shaughnessy reassured Volpe that she was steering her colleagues back to focus on basic skills—and that she had recruited Bambara:

Toni Cade [Bambara] is working on a series of central lectures (on such standard problems as organization, verb tenses, fragments, etc.) that can be given to combined sections next semester. We will continue the section arrangement, of course, but work in a few central lectures so as to be certain that all students have instruction in those problems that are often neglected or skimpily treated by teachers who want to get on with the discussion of great big ideas (p. 1).
Shaughnessy told Volpe she had scheduled some faculty seminars: three about contrasts between “Standard English” and black, Spanish and Chinese dialects, one by Bambara about “teaching organization” and one on teaching poetry by Barbara Christian and Alice Trillin (p. 1).

Switching to a more distant tone, she described the 1967 SEEK lectures on black literature:

I gather the program ended with Tony Penale dashing about making arrangements for rooms, loudspeakers, etc. and all the lecturers disappearing except for Toni Cade [Bambara] (who gave one lecture) and Addison [Gayle] (who gave eight). This year they have decided to include Puerto Rican literature and they hope to have one or two writers speak. Altogether there will be six lectures (p. 1).

Then Shaughnessy voiced two complaints on behalf of her faculty: the SEEK teachers felt “unwanted and uncomfortable” at faculty meetings. And, unlike every other English teacher, they had no office space. This created serious problems meeting with students, and “most importantly, their contention that they are invisible is seriously reinforced by the failure to allot them space” (p. 2). She closed on a personal note, asking about Volpe’s health and enclosing a copy of her published poem “Milton” (p. 2).

Shaughnessy’s Dilemma: Dive In and Build Bridges or Guard Gates?

As SEEK’s new director, Shaughnessy faced a range of conflicting expectations. Bambara, Christian and Gayle were experienced, sophisticated and critical teachers who were willing to ignore, defy, or attack Volpe and the department. Many SEEK students were increasingly vocal activists who could oust a SEEK administrator. Shaughnessy answered to

49 They had some good reasons. For example, when Volpe introduced the seven SEEK instructors to the department a year earlier, professor Henry Leffert openly argued “that such programs should be the business of the community colleges…” (Minutes, 1966, October 6, p. 1).

50 In January of 1969, SEEK students at Queens College ransacked the office of their SEEK program director, dumped his furniture into the street and successfully demanded his resignation.
Ballard and indirectly to Berger, who was now a CUNY dean. SEEK was being closely watched by President Gallagher and Chairman Bowker as well as the Albany politicians who funded it only year-to-year; all these SEEK stakeholders expected SEEK students to stay in school, succeed in coursework, and advance toward graduation. To them, SEEK’s role was to dive in, meet students wherever they were, and serve as their bridge to success. But Shaughnessy also answered to Volpe and the conservative members of the English professorate who demanded that all writing courses focus on teaching grammar, enforced by high-stakes grammar exams and who had segregated the SEEK teachers from the main department.

Between these essentially opposing forces, Shaughnessy held her own values, goals, habits and ambitions. Unlike Kriegel, Bambara, Volpe, Rich, Gayle and others, Shaughnessy never directly exposed and examined her own personal struggles in her writings. As with her first report to Volpe, Shaughnessy’s letters, reports, academic writing and speeches almost always evidenced her keen rhetor’s sense of the effect of her language on her intended audiences. But her deep, unresolved conflicts frequently surfaced as well.

Both Shaughnessy’s admirers and critics have observed these conflicts. Ira Shor found a “duality” in her work, with “one leg in traditionalism and one in experimentalism” (1992, p. 98). Bruce Horner observed Shaughnessy “walking a kind of tightrope” (1999, p. 26). Mary Soliday and Mark McBeth both viewed her as a pragmatic, but often oppositional, “intellectual bureaucrat” with limited agency in a complex system (Soliday, 2002, p. 96; McBeth, 2007, p. 50). Min-Zhan Lu recognized a gap between the constructivist “pedagogical advice” in Shaughnessy’s “Diving In” and her essentialism in Errors (1991, p. 28).

(Lubasch, 1969, January 14; 1969, February 4; Berger, 1969, October 21, p. iii). In the spring of 1969, University Center SEEK students and faculty also successfully demanded that their director be replaced (Yost, Collier & Goldstein, 1974, March, pp. 69-71).
Like Penale, Shaughnessy was an enthusiastic and caring formalist. But her preoccupation with form was complicated by her deep understanding of writing theory. By all accounts her commitments to teachers, teaching and students were genuine and powerful. She had spent much of her own adult life trying (and failing) to become a full-time teacher. Yet she also agreed to enter City College as a bureaucrat/teacher and within a few years became a full time researcher and administrator. She aggressively tackled her administrative duties; she began to build influence and reshape the SEEK writing program; she quickly and confidently reported her successes; there are glimpses of her ambition in her very first report. These internal conflicts sharpened her dilemma between the pressures to build bridges or to guard gates.

Shaughnessy’s Ten-hour, Zero-Credit, SEEK Remedial Writing Course (1967-1968)

In her first month as director, Shaughnessy changed SEEK’s collective writing pedagogy in two significant ways. The first was described in her September letter to Volpe. She tasked Bambara to periodically interrupt all SEEK writing course sections to give them large group lectures about grammar. This was a move Shaughnessy would often repeat: an administrative innovation that promoted regressive, grammar-centric pedagogy. (This one was regressive in two ways: it restored direct grammar instruction to all SEEK writing courses and it converted some small workshop sessions to group lectures.) Again and again, similarly regressive innovations would serve Shaughnessy well: all would admire and acclaim her creative innovation while conservatives quietly approved the regressive pedagogy.

Shaughnessy’s second curricular “innovation” in her first semester was a new “intensive (10 hours a week) remedial course” (Ballard, 1968, August 22, p. 5; Berger 1968, October 15, p. 40). Volpe loved the idea; he included it in his chair report: “Shaughnessy…revised… the remedial English [Five] course into a course that exposes the student to two teachers, one
offering basic grammar, the other a professional writer, handling the writing assignments. Next year, the course will be enhanced by the poets Adrienne Rich and Paul Blackburn and the novelist George Mandel” (Volpe 1968, p. 4). Shaughnessy’s ten-hour, zero-credit remedial writing course was perfectly tailored to win Volpe’s approval: it was team-taught, so it could be hailed as another creative innovation. It built on Volpe’s own idea to hire professional writers (as lecturers) to teach writing courses. And, it re-centered direct grammar instruction into the SEEK writing program. There were 173 incoming SEEK students that fall. Shaughnessy created nine sections of her ten-hour remedial writing course with a 15-student cap—placing up to 135 new students into it (Berger, 1969, October 21, p. 104; Shaughnessy, 1967, September 22).

Although Penale had placed some SEEK students into zero-credit English Five courses in 1966-1967 (Gayle, 1968a, p. 398; Arce, 2016, June 9, p. 2), the SEEK teachers, including Gayle, could integrate and balance writing and grammar at their discretion. And the five-hour writing classes left students room in their programs for some credit-bearing classes. Now, one English teacher was assigned to teach only grammar for five hours a week. Even the five weekly hours dedicated strictly to writing (which were the exact equivalent of the mainstream full-credit, Mirsky English One voice pilot which began at this same exact time) offered no college credit and was labeled as remedial. This shift played into Volpe’s biases that: 1) all SEEK writing courses were really remedial; 2) creative “writer-teachers” and “poet-teachers” could not teach SEEK courses alone; and 3) a sub-class of lecturers should focus strictly on grammar instruction.

Shaughnessy’s “innovation” dramatically increased the total amount of remedial, zero-credit SEEK instruction. This violated Berger’s goal to “consistently [aim] to place students in regular college classes as soon as possible” (1968, October 15, p. 39). Regular and compensatory, partial-credit SEEK classes encouraged student success with forward momentum
as they accumulated college credits. But Berger and Ballard had deferred to Penale, Bambara, Christian and Gayle; now they also deferred to Shaughnessy.

To illustrate the credits problem, information in different reports provides a rough comparison between the Fall 1965 and Spring 1967 incoming SEEK students. The 1965 SEEK students all took a five-hour, stretched SEEK version of mainstream English One; if they passed, they earned four college credits and they completed a required course (“Pre-Baccalaureate,” 1965, October 7). That semester, the full-time incoming SEEK students could earn up to seventeen college credits in a mix of mainstream and compensatory courses and they had some choices in their courses: English (4 credits), speech (4 credits), math or language (3-4 credits), music or art (2-3 credits), and gym (2 credits) (“Pre-Baccalaureate, 1965, October 7).

In the Spring of 1968 there were 58 incoming SEEK students; they took a total of 127 “Remedial Courses,” or an average of 2.2 zero-credit courses for each student (Berger, 1968, October 15, p. 44). That semester, Shaughnessy placed 63 SEEK students into the ten-hour, zero-credit course, apparently including most or all of the new SEEK students and some repeaters (Ballard, 1968, August 22, App II). These new Spring 1967 SEEK students took an average of only 3.1 college credits (Berger, 1968, October 15, p. 44). This huge drop in college credits makes sense because Shaughnessy’s ten-hour remedial course crowded out everything else: if new students took one other remedial course (as most did), they would have room left for only one credit-bearing course (as most did). Plus, English Five did not satisfy a mainstream college course requirement. Students still had to take English One. And in SEEK most also took English Two. Shaughnessy extended the SEEK writing sequence for many students to 20 hours over three semesters to earn eight college credits and satisfy one mainstream course requirement.
By itself, Shaughnessy’s team-teaching “innovation” dramatically slowed the SEEK students’ progress toward degree, increased their segregation into a sub-college track, and marked more of SEEK’s writing coursework as remedial. A year later, the 88 incoming Spring 1969 SEEK students made similarly slow progress: they took a total of 154 “Remedial Courses,” an average of 1.9 for each student; and they took an average of only 3.4 college credits (Berger, 1969, October 21, p. 54).

**Shaughnessy As A Gifted and Caring Grammar Tutor (1967-1969)**

Yet Shaughnessy was also a generous and caring teacher. After her first year, Marvina White still struggled with run-on sentences and fleshing-out arguments. Christian and other teachers had tried to help her, but she “really didn’t… get it” (White, 2015, January 27, p. 7). The other SEEK English teachers sent White to Shaughnessy:

I introduced myself and she was… so lovely…. She had a sort of sweet, soft, embracing voice and appearing at her door meant she was yours…. She looked at the paper, the first paper I took her, and she pointed out precisely where this thing that I thought was a sentence was actually run on. But we didn’t focus so much on the grammar… she talked about how this was burying my idea, how stopping this run on at the appropriate place really meant that I could say more and that I could, that I could see what I was arguing…. [And] it was true that the verb then became more alive. And… I learned that what I had to say was worth expressing, that… when I thought I had nothing… to say or when I thought that something was dumb even, she would point out what I was actually saying and where I needed to say more (p. 7).

White continued for years to bring her papers to Shaughnessy for advice. When White guiltily confessed that she loved detective novels, Shaughnessy praised her analytical mind. “[She] found
a way to connect me [as a] person with the things in the world I found interesting and even pointed a way for me to use those things to succeed in school. I mean, this is what I think any really strong, solid professor should be able to do for their students. It takes time and for some reason she had the time” (p. 8).

And White was not an isolated case. Shaughnessy wrote to all SEEK students in March of 1969, offering

help in your writing or literature courses (grammatical trouble spots, organizational snags in themes and term papers, research problems, questions on the interpretation of poetry or other forms of literature, or guidance during review sessions)…. All you need to do is stop by the SEEK English office and tell us what you need. We will do the rest (Shaughnessy, 1969, March 3, p. 1).

In addition to the individual assistance that Shaughnessy offered, she also attached “a schedule for the Grammar Cycle,” a series of eighteen voluntary workshops that she would teach over ten weeks that Spring. 51 “Students in the regular English 1 can use the cycle as a preparation for the grammar examination. Students in [SEEK English Five, One and Two writing courses] can use it to reinforce whatever grammatical work they are already getting.”

Shaughnessy’s commitment to students was genuine; she was a caring and supportive teacher. White credits her college success in part to Shaughnessy (p. 8). There was also a leadership message within Shaughnessy’s tutoring and grammar cycle. As Shaughnessy asked SEEK teachers to teach copy-editing and grammar lessons, she (unlike Volpe and most of the professors) led by example and did her share of the difficult work.

51 The workshop subjects were: parts of the sentence, agreement (two sessions), fragments (two), verb forms (two), pronoun reference, pronoun case, punctuation (single comma, double comma, semi-colon and colon, quotations and apostrophe), parallelism (two), adverb forms, adjective forms, and review (1969, March 3, p. 2).
Shaughnessy’s Teacher Report (Summer 1968)

In the Fall of 1968, Shaughnessy co-wrote and edited a 39-page “Report on the 1968 SEEK English Summer Seminar.” Christian, Bambara, Gayle, Henderson, Byron and Shaughnessy each wrote their own course reports. Christian added four student essays. Henderson added one.\(^5\) In all, the report contains eleven teacher and student voices in conversation. As I noted in the last chapter, Christian, Bambara, Gayle and Byron taught very different courses, all succeeding in different ways to build SEEK student confidence and encourage student writing.

Shaughnessy taught one 1968 summer section; in her five-page teaching report, she was again conflicted. Like Bambara and Christian, Shaughnessy shaped her class only after asking for input from students. Shaughnessy’s students told her they were too busy to write; they wanted “a class that would teach them something about writing without requiring much writing. A difficult combination” (Shaughnessy, 1968, Fall, p. 30). But, while Bambara and Christian overcame student resistance and induced their students to write in various forms, Shaughnessy acquiesced and her students wrote very little. Struggling to explain her teaching goals, Shaughnessy detoured into her personal stance on the importance of organization within the process of writing:

Order in writing is not a frame, like a pool rack, that imposes its pattern from without.

Rather it is something that grows out of a matrix statement, the foliation, the maturation of an idea…. The problem lies, however, in the fertility of all sentences and in the capacity of each sentence not only to repeat an idea but to change it, or at least to set the

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\(^5\) The seventh teacher, poet Aijaz Ahmad, did not submit a report for his two creative writing classes. The next spring Ahmad became the SEEK Program director at the University Center, where Berger ignited an academic free speech controversy by directing Ahmad not to renew teaching assignments for ten radical teachers (Yost, Collier & Goldstein, 1974).
direction of its development. Every sentence, in short, is a matrix, bearing within it a new set of possibilities…. Any technique of organization that ignores this wilderness, that limits the freedom of the writer to see and make choices at every step, to move ahead sometimes without knowing for certain which is north and south, then to drop back again and pick up the old path, and finally to get where he is going, partly by conscious effort but also by some faculty of intellection that is too complex to understand—any technique, that sacrifices this fullest possible play of the mind for the security of an outline or some other prefabricated frame is objectionable (pp. 30-31).

Instead, Shaughnessy continued, “the movement… through writing” is like “an over-all commitment, perhaps, to get to California, but [requiring] a readiness, all along the way, to choose alternative routes and even to sojourn at unexpected places when that seems wise or important, sometimes, even, to decide that California isn’t what the writer really had in mind” (p. 31).

But having offered these complex, and even beautiful, explanations of writing process—Shaughnessy then used much of her summer class to talk about paragraphs by looking at sentence “coordination and subordination,” citing Francis Christensen’s work.53 “Working with a great variety of paragraphs, from newspapers, magazines and novels, we arranged sentences so as to indicate levels of generality” (p. 31). For example, Shaughnessy detailed how her class discerned “the levels of coordination and subordination” in a Pete Hamill description of the scene in the California hotel kitchen in the moments before Robert Kennedy entered and was assassinated. Despite the shattering power of the subject, Shaughnessy described her class exercise as a purely formal one, measuring the “level of generality” in each sentence (p. 32).

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53 (p. 31). Apparently her source was his 1967 Notes Toward a New Rhetoric: Six Essays For Teachers.
Shaughnessy also assigned and discussed four readings: Baldwin’s 1968 novel *Tell Me How Long The Train’s Been Gone*, Baldwin’s essay “Notes of a Native Son,” Orwell’s essay “Such, Such Were the Joys,” and Ellison’s 1952 novel, *Invisible Man* (pp. 32-34). She described only one writing assignment, in which she asked students to build a theme using a topic sentence borrowed from Orwell: “‘No one can look back on his schooldays and say in truth that they were altogether happy’ (or unhappy if the student preferred)” (p. 34). The students opened up about several painful experiences. One student wrote about (and went to visit) his childhood orphanage. Two described hurtful childhood teachers. But the assignment ended there. The papers were “unrevised and no one wanted me to use them in this report” (p. 34).

Shaughnessy was uncertain herself about the class. Noting that teachers “seldom know whether they have taught anything, and if so, what,” she could say only that “we seemed often to be talking about writing in a way that made sense to the students and that they seemed to enjoy” (p. 34).

**Shaughnessy’s Summer Program Administrator Report (Fall 1968)**

As director, Shaughnessy was more confident: she openly argued for the SEEK students, teachers, program, and herself. She praised the “genetic toughness” both of the students, “most of whom… worked all day and then rushed up to City College in thick, muggy, New York heat” to their classes, and the “teachers who kept doggedly showing up with their books and notes and corrected themes, ready to take on new students, old students, or almost anyone who happened to wander into the classroom that night” (Shaughnessy, 1968, Fall, p. 1). She noted that the teachers were all willing to teach the classes although there was “no prospect of money of any kind” until Shaughnessy obtained an NEA grant that “enabled us to pay for our teachers and books and expand our program to include new students” (pp. 1-2). She recognized that the same program
had run in previous summers for incoming students, but lauded her new expansion: “nothing like this had been tried for old students” (p. 1).

Shaughnessy listed six “general observations” that arose from evaluation meetings among the teachers. Three were complaints about facilities or funding. Shaughnessy also observed that students wrote more and showed up more for classes which met more frequently. In one observation, she noted that literature “by black writers dominated most of our classes” and opined that no teacher “who faces a class of black students whose ‘connection’ with academia is new and uncertain can be anything but grateful for the substantial and growing body of literature by black writers—novels, essays, stories, poetry—that has the power to engage the student in an analysis not only of himself and his experience but also of a crisis that is crucial to our times” (p. 3). Shaughnessy was now siding in the canon debate with her SEEK teachers—if not with their related complaints about white critics of black art. Lastly, Shaughnessy asserted:

Although we did not originally think of the summer seminar as a writing workshop, we all felt under some pressure to get writing samples from our students….But the students did not have time to write and often did not want to write. They wanted to read, talk, think…. they did not want their materials “used” for a report. In the future, we agreed, writing should not be central to a summer seminar, although students should be encouraged to write when they feel like it (p. 3).

Here, Shaughnessy almost directly contradicted Christian, who had founded the summer program three years earlier, and who saw it as “a means… of involving the students in writing” (Christian, 1968, fall, p. 17). Indeed, everything in Christian’s 1968 classes served to build student confidence and fluency as writers. Christian even attached four student essays to her report—and said she could have added many more (pp. 17-18).
Shaughnessy’s SEEK English One Course (Spring 1969)

Shaughnessy saved a folder that included her Spring 1969 SEEK English One course syllabus and schedule and some additional student hand-outs. Together they provide a detailed view of her course plan during her fourth semester in SEEK. She required six books: Ruth Benedict’s 1934 *Patterns of Culture*, Ellison’s 1952 *Invisible Man*, Emmanuel and Gross’s 1968 anthology *Dark Symphony*, Fitzgerald’s 1925 *The Great Gatsby*, Gayle’s 1969 anthology *Black Expression*, Kafka’s 1952 *Selected Short Stories*, and Orwell’s 1954 *A Collection of Essays* (Shaughnessy, 1969, Spring, p. 1). The SEEK students received free books, so Shaughnessy could order both of the competing black anthologies recently edited within her department. A class list handout showed ten students; handwritten corrections added two or three more. Shaughnessy listed student addresses and phone numbers as well as her office and home addresses and phone numbers.

Shaughnessy explained her goal: “[this] course is intended to develop your skill in the kind of expository writing that will be required of you in most college courses” (p. 1). There were four units. In the three-class “Unit One,” Shaughnessy covered “writing that describes the way things (people and places) look and act” and she assigned five readings from *Dark Symphony*, as well as two in-class writing themes, and one out-of-class theme describing “a person in a place” (pp. 1-2). In her six-class “Unit Two” on “writing that not only describes and narrates but goes on to state a point,” Shaughnessy assigned Orwell’s “Such, Such Were the Joys” and Baldwin’s “Notes of a Native Son,” as well as two in-class themes, and one out-of-class theme about “a childhood experience” (pp. 1-2). In Shaughnessy’s nine-class “Unit Three” on “theoretical writing,” she assigned nine chapters of Benedict’s anthropology treatise, two Orwell essays, four in-class writing themes and two outside themes. One in-class theme asked
students to explain and then argue—using examples from the Benedict’s chapter on Pueblo and Dobu cultures—for one of two statements: “Life crises are treated as terror situations in some cultures and as normal or controllable situations in others” or, “a happy marriage is created by a culture, not by individuals in that culture” (Shaughnessy, 1969, February).

A three-class mini-unit was then devoted to exercises about bibliographies, quotations and the research paper (1969, Spring, pp. 1-3). A “Methods of Quotation (Example)” handout offered examples of four ways Benedict wove quotes into her writing (1969, February).

Shaughnessy ended with a twelve-class “Unit Four” on “discovery of meaning in the works of others.” (1969, Spring, p. 1). Shaughnessy assigned Invisible Man, three essays from Black Expression (including Christian’s essay on Ellison), The Great Gatsby and “Metamorphosis.” She assigned two more in-class themes, and three outside papers: a book report, a critical essay on Gatsby, and a theme on Gatsby’s culture, and held individual conferences about papers (pp. 3-4). The book report assignment required students to read one of eleven books, as well as model book reviews from a list of newspapers, popular journals and scholarly journals. The book choices ranged from Achebe’s 1958 novel Things Fall Apart and LaFarge’s 1929 novel Laughing Boy to Mead’s 1928 Coming of Age in Samoa and Myrdal’s 1963 Report From a Chinese Village (1969, February).

One class in unit four was replaced by a guest lecture from lecturer Anne Cook on “African survivals in black speech” (1969, Spring, p. 5). Shaughnessy ended with a class discussion on the “relation between identity and culture,” three days of “class reading” of final term papers, and then a final exam (p. 4). Shaughnessy didn’t specify her weighting of final grades, but students were also required to collect all course writings in a three-ring binder and submit the whole binder at the end of the semester (p. 1).
Additional course handouts included advice on “Notetaking,” “The Thesis Statement,” a “proofreading” exercise, a coordination/subordination analysis of a paragraph from Benedict, and a “Check-List for Themes,” which advised students to review their thesis statement, transitions, organization and make several proof-reading passes for errors. In all, Shaughnessy’s readings included a non-fiction book, three novels, fourteen short stories and essays, and a separate book for the book report. She also assigned significant writing: a few short exercises, eight in-class writing themes, eight papers written outside class, including a book report and term paper, and an in-class final exam of some kind. The ambitious content of the class reflects the bridge program purpose of SEEK; Shaughnessy was preparing her students to enter rigorous mainstream college courses.

In some ways, Shaughnessy’s writing pedagogy in this course closely followed the 1965 mainstream English One syllabus. Units one, two and three and the mini-unit (21 classes) used mostly non-fiction readings and in-class themes, allowing a focus on error-corrections. But Shaughnessy used no grammar handbook or grammar workbook and there were no grammar sheet exercises. Unit four (12 classes) shifted to fiction, literary criticism, outside writing assignments and a term paper. Shaughnessy’s substantial focus on Benedict added a theme of cultural constructivism, reinforced by her final class discussion on “identity and culture.” She included a final exam; but not the Department’s high-stakes grammar exam (Shaughnessy, 1969, March 22). She also devoted three classes to readings of revised term papers and she asked students to submit three ring binders with all their course work—a kind of portfolio assessment.

**Mixed Influences Within the SEEK Teaching Circle (1967-1969)**

Mayes recalls that Penale did not influence her teaching although “he was extremely kind and supportive.” She disagreed with his goal of making the “SEEK students into scholars,” his
sense of teaching as molding “the students like clay,” and his choice to teach “the classics” (Mayes, 2016, June 29, p. 3). And Mayes explains that:

Mina was better than Tony at embracing the brilliance of what the students and teachers brought to the program. She listened rather than told; she picked people’s brains: “Janet, tell me your opinion about this; tell me your opinion about that.” She incorporated my ideas about tutoring-based classes and the Writing Center into the program. In short I grew exponentially from Mina, the faculty and especially from my students (p. 3).

Kriegel described Shaughnessy in 1968 as pressing the SEEK teachers to remain focused on the actual needs of students. “Whenever any of us turned away from these problems…she would gently but forcibly bring us back to our students and their seemingly mundane world” (Kriegel, 1972, p. 173). It seems unlikely that Shaughnessy deeply influenced the teaching of the more senior SEEK teachers like Bambara, Christian, Gayle and Byron. In their Summer 1968 classes, Christian and Bambara had already evolved distinct student-centered, conversational pedagogies that combined process writing and critical teaching; they had both relegated grammar instruction to a secondary concern at the end of the writing and thinking process; Christian had shifted her course focus from reading and writing about literature toward inwardly generated writing process—making writers rather than scholars. Bambara’s more rhetorical critical pedagogy explored the limits of classroom power structures with a Freirean focus on literacy as empowering action against oppression.

Still, there were some mutual influences. Shaughnessy induced Bambara to develop and give group grammar lectures. And Bambara, Christian and Gayle continued to influence each other as well as new SEEK writing teachers that including David Henderson, Raymond Paterson,
Larry Neal, June Jordan and Audre Lorde. Adrienne Rich saved the entire 1968 Summer English report in her files. Mayes remembers that in the SEEK teacher meetings,

> I [was] in awe of Barbara Christian and Toni Cade. They talked about their teaching and students…. They were both energetic, political, outspoken—especially Toni—models of what I wanted to be. They were amazing, dedicated teachers. And Toni was always right on the money in catching and calling out racism in this white middleclass enclave in the middle of Harlem. I emulated Toni Cade;… (p. 3).

But Shaughnessy was gaining more direct and indirect influence, both on individual teachers like Rich and Mayes and through her regressive innovations that reshaped the entire program.


Shaughnessy assigned Rich in Fall, 1968 to be a “writer-teacher” in one of the ten-hour English Five courses. Rich described her job that year as “to ‘turn the students on to writing’ by whatever means I wanted—poetry, free association, music, politics, drama, fiction…” (1973, p. 260). In a letter to Rich (and copied to Volpe) Shaughnessy explained:

> English [Five] is a two-part composition course, with one part concentrating on applied grammar, sentence and paragraph instruction, and the mechanics of composition and the other part (your part) concentrating on creative writing and on reading that seems to related to the students’ experiences. The grammar section meets three times a week; the creative writing, two times (Shaughnessy, 1968, June 11, p. 1).

Shaughnessy told Rich she could select her own books, and urged a prompt textbook order. The 15 students would be selected by a placement exam: “Some… will have done little writing in high school; many will have problems with syntax and grammar; a few will have some control over written English; and a number will write with imagination and enthusiasm. Hopefully, all
will discover in your class something of the pleasure in using words to explore their own experiences” (Shaughnessy, 1968, June 11, p. 1).

Shaughnessy noted that “all the writer-teachers have had the students keep journals or write autobiographies, and they have often used a part of the class period as a writing workshop” (p. 2). She advised Rich to make a plan, but be ready to alter it once into the semester, perhaps by dropping some readings, when her instincts told her to do so. “We are none of us quite certain about what works best, and we often discover that our students have learned what we weren’t aware we were teaching. But somehow, the effort to remain responsive to the students’ thinking and feeling seems to create a situation in which something can happen” (p. 2).

Rich had previously taught only poetry seminars at Swarthmore and Columbia (Rich, 1973, p. 258). Her Fall 1968 reading list was limited and mostly poetry: LeRoi Jones’ 1968 Home: Social Essays, and his 1964 book of poems, The Dead Lecturer, Leary & Kelly’s 1965 poetry anthology A Controversy of Poets, supplemented by some of her own poems. She asked Shaughnessy whether ten pages of reading and a writing assignment each week would be enough and whether she should teach vocabulary directly (Rich, 1968, June 18). Shaughnessy encouraged more reading. As to vocabulary, Shaughnessy reported they had tried various methods with unclear results. “Slow as it is, I tend to trust the method that keeps the word in its setting, that gives it the special meaning that it gathers from its context….”

In Spring 1969, Rich taught SEEK English One (Section 1.8G). This was a single teacher, credit-bearing class. In April 1969, Rich wrote a summary of her course. Her readings were the 1845 autobiography, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, a chapter on Douglass

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54 (Shaughnessy, 1968, June 26). Other than three student essay samples, Rich’s Radcliffe archive contains no teaching materials from her Fall 1968 SEEK English Five class. Many of her teaching materials are mixed together and/or are undated; likely she reused many from 1968 to 1974; but I limit my discussion here to materials I can place in a specific semester.

Rich sought to develop writers, not scholars. She hoped students would respond to literature as part of their lives “rather than as a preparation for scholarship in an English Ph.D. program” (1969, April, p. 2). Like Bambara, she wanted to “stimulate students to write in a number of forms encountered through the reading: essay, biography, poetry, fiction, argument” (p. 1). She assigned a long paper and short in-class paper each week, conferred frequently with students about their writing; she offered both grammar corrections and (like Christian in 1966) appended comments “as to the ideas & arguments presented” (p. 1). Based on a student vote, she did not grade the papers (p. 1). Echoing Christian’s 1966 class model, Rich began classes with short lectures offering historical perspective on assigned readings, leading into wide ranging class discussions (p. 1). In these discussions, Rich tried to raise questions about style or deeper themes (p. 1). Although the record of this course is fragmentary, there is no evidence that Rich taught any direct grammar lessons. (She would do so later.) Rich later described her teaching philosophy as “a fundamental belief in the students is more important than anything else…. it is a demanding matter of realistically conceiving the student where he or she is, and at the same time never losing sight of where he or she can be.” (1973, p. 271-72).
In the late spring of 1969, student protests erupted and only six students showed up for Rich’s last class; four others had disappeared weeks earlier and missed substantial work; Rich was unable to reach them. She asked Shaughnessy to give out summer assignments to the missing students so they could make up the incompletes. For the six students who completed the course, Rich urged that two be allowed to skip English Two. A handwritten note showed Shaughnessy approved one skip and denied one. Rich also recommended that two others receive “intensive grammar” tutorials in the fall (Rich, 1969, Summer).

Mayes Evolves From a Grammarian to Teaching Writing Process (1967-1970)

In 1961, as a City College transfer student and sophomore, Mayes took first-year composition with Fred Shipley, a full professor who had graduated college in 1921 and had joined the City College faculty shortly after the stock market crash of 1929 (Bulletin, 1965; Johnson, 1973, p. 14). Shipley was a literal link to City’s College’s formalist writing pedagogy dating back to the Great Depression. When Mayes taught her first English One class, only six years after taking it with Shipley, she transferred much of his pedagogy to her students:

when I first came to SEEK, I was a rigid grammarian; I thought all students should learn the “king’s English.” At first, in SEEK my teaching was grounded in my own freshman comp class at City in 1961; I taught direct grammar lessons. I taught using a literature model. I had students write about what they were reading. I also taught forms of model essays, a method that I had learned when I took freshman composition (2016, June 29, p. 2).

But Mayes always believed that teachers “must start where the student is and respect what they bring into the classroom” (p. 2). She chose her own course readings and chose mostly individual books rather than anthologies. “I had become interested in Black writers at Berkeley; I began to
offer great Black writers to students when I taught in I.S. 88; I included them in my City College SEEK courses starting in Spring 1967. I taught *Lysistrata* and Thoreau, but I also taught Langston Hughes and Richard Wright” (p. 3).

And soon, Mayes recalls: “I realized that students had to draft first and then use grammar rules to edit their writing. Get their ideas there, spill them out—and then ‘English it up’ later. I continued to teach grammar, like subject/verb agreement and how to recognize and ‘fix’ run-on sentences. But I told the students to write first, and then to use those rules later when they were editing. I never used the *English 3200* grammar handbook or another grammar textbook” (p. 3). Moreover,

I didn’t give any grammar tests; instead, I showed students how to apply the rules that they learned when they rewrote their drafts. (I didn’t give out grades on the early drafts.) So, one student would have trouble with subject/verb agreement, run on sentences. I’d ask that student to focus on one thing only in a rewrite and show her how to do it; then she’d edit the draft to “fix” that kind of issue. My mood was: don’t let your wonderful ideas get tossed away by the traditional collegiate readers because of grammatical and organizational issues (p. 4).

Mayes began to experiment with methods to develop student fluency:

One way was to have students talk out a rough draft. I’d say, “just explain it as you would to a very smart ten-year-old. Say it and expect them to ask questions and put in the answers to those questions.” Students might tape record their words and then transcribe them. Or they’d work in pairs: one partner would talk into a tape recorder while the other asked questions. Then the writer would transcribe the spoken draft and revise. Students were often stuck because they worried about writing everything down perfectly the first
time. They learned to just spill out their ideas. Then, I’d say, “OK, now let’s put it into a form where you add a lead-in to the first paragraph and some kind of topic sentence for the essay, and then, in subsequent paragraphs add specifics to prove your point, or elaborate on your idea.” That would produce a second draft (still not worrying about grammar and spelling). The third draft included editing and proofreading. This method evolved as I taught in the program (p. 4).

Even when Mayes assigned in-class essays, she converted them into collaborative exercises. “[In]-class themes… traditionally were supposed to be completed alone without much rewrite; but I organized the students to work with peer support, with students helping each other by asking questions when they got stuck and then rewriting and editing their own drafts” (p. 4).

**Mayes Develops a New Collaborative Course and Writing Center Model (1968-1970)**

By the fall of 1967, Mayes was in charge of SEEK’s English tutoring (Shaughnessy, 1967, September 22, p. 1). In 1967 or 1968, Shaughnessy assigned her to be the grammar teacher in one of the ten-hour, zero-credit courses as a team-teacher with Audre Lorde. Mayes remembers that Lorde “often would visit my classroom, because she said she wanted to learn teaching techniques from me, which really blew my mind; I never believed I was special or particularly skilled, and Audre made me feel great about my work” (p. 1). As a tutor and grammar specialist, Mayes continued to teach direct grammar lessons, but she found ways to embed that instruction within real writing and collaborative learning—rather than use skills drills and timed tests. On a summer vacation in about 1968, Mayes visited the University of Iowa and observed their writing tutors.

I thought this was a great model for us to use in the City College SEEK Program, and wrote a detailed proposal for how to structure the first-level basic writing course. I
proposed longer classroom hours, more times a week, with peer support and student tutors whom we would screen, recruited from the pool of English majors. In these new first level writing classes, the students would have no homework—all work would be done during these longer classroom hours—because so many of our students experienced strenuous difficulties getting their work done at home. After the lesson of the day, the students would all do their exercises, writing and editing in this very supportive on-campus atmosphere, with tutors and their teacher circulating to help.

I developed my proposed model of learning-through-validation, by drawing from Harry Stack Sullivan’s Interpersonal Theory about how people learn. Ultimately, my doctoral dissertation in Clinical Psychology (Yeshiva University, 1978) was on “Social Facilitation of Learning” (p. 2).

Mayes presented her idea to a group of faculty who were nervous about her non-traditional idea (p. 2). In April, 1969, Shaughnessy flew out to Iowa herself to study their program (Mayes, 2016, June 29, p. 2; Barber, 1969, April 30). Then Shaughnessy obtained English Department approval and asked Mayes to implement her proposal (Mayes, 2016, June 29, p. 2).

From this Mayes model, they then “developed the walk-in Writing Center” (p. 2). After 1970, Mayes began to study as a Ph.D. student in clinical psychology and she also began to work as a collaborative learning/writing center consultant. Kenneth Bruffee hired her to set up his new writing center at Brooklyn College. Mayes also consulted on or led basic writing, tutoring and collaborative learning programs at Baruch College, Montclair State University, Ramapo College, and Bucks County Community College (p. 5). In 1972, Mayes published Writing and Rewriting, a book of applied grammar exercises:
I created intentional errors (according to the lesson covered in a particular chapter) in uncredited passages from, for example, Baldwin’s *Native Son*. Students would read the passage to find and edit the intentional errors; then they would look up the “answers” in the back of the book and read the original passage in context, with the author’s name and citation. So, learning how to catch grammatical and syntactical errors would be fun and instructive, because students were also reading great works of literature and guessing who the authors were (pp. 5-6).

Much of Mayes’ work grappled with finding creative and collaborative ways to incorporate effective grammar instruction into a fluid, multi-draft, collaborative writing teaching model and writing center pedagogy. She opposed the new City College Proficiency Exam (p. 6) and the other high-stakes writing exams that were soon developed across CUNY.

I don’t like what Mina ultimately did as a Dean at CUNY. She developed and implemented standardized tests as gateways. I don’t think you can judge people based on whether they can pass a standardized test in order to be allowed to go on and get a higher degree. It’s a British model, and it’s classist and racist. Not everybody tests well. And I’m sorry that she evolved into that, from where she came from with her wonderful heart (p. 6).

**Shaughnessy Mocks the Writing Proficiency Exam as “Attic Furniture” (1968)**

In 1968, when Volpe also asked for faculty comments about the new Proficiency Exam, Shaughnessy proposed a day-long writing exam with a morning of reading, open lunchtime discussions, and an afternoon of writing open-book essays—echoing Mayes’ model. Shaughnessy argued that students were unlikely in any event to do their best writing “under examination conditions.” She concluded that the “curriculum change offers a grand excuse for
housecleaning and I am hoping that the traditional kind of essay examination will go out along with some of the other attic furniture.” (1968, Summer, pp. 1-2). Writing to the entire department, Shaughnessy was careful. She mocked the new test rather than oppose it; she tried to lower the stakes by giving students time to read, confer, draft and revise across an entire day.

Although Volpe had engineered both the 1965 high-stakes grammar final in English One and then the 1968 high-stakes writing proficiency exam, he admitted that he was “no expert in tests and measurements” (1972, p. 767). Shaughnessy’s 1968 comments show she was already studying test theory and positioning herself as an authority; she added technical notes about rater variability and cited an article about the tendency of raters to grade using general impressions (1968, Summer, p. 1). This new testing expertise soon would help Shaughnessy control writing test systems at City College and later throughout CUNY.

**Implementing the City College Writing Proficiency Exam (November, 1969)**

City College implemented its new Proficiency Exam in November of 1969. Despite Shaughnessy’s hopes, it was very much a traditional essay exam. Within three hours, students were required to write two 300-word essays in response to two out of three offered prompts (Danzig, 1969, November; 1973, April). The exam was conceived as a graduation requirement, stripping away any argument that students needed the exam to succeed in City College courses. To the contrary, the Proficiency Exam was conceived by English professors in 1965, approved by them in 1968, and designed and implemented by them in 1969—all based on their assumption that students would otherwise successfully graduate from City College without meeting their minimum standards for sentence correctness. The exam was in no way a bridge; it was a deliberate barrier to student success. In supporting the new Proficiency Exam, Volpe argued that
the “responsibility for writing competence has been transferred, to the student, where it should be” (Volpe, 1968, May 1, p. 1).


Since the 1950s, researchers have observed that tests can distort curriculum as teachers and learners “end up teaching and learning toward the test” (Cheng & Curtis, 2004, p. 9). The “unintended consequences” of rising-junior proficiency writing exams “have been unfortunate to some and devastating to others” (White, 2005, p. 31). Linguists describe the positive or negative “influence of testing on teaching and learning” as “washback” and refer to the unintended and sometimes even unconscious ways that tests can harm instruction, instructors and students as “negative washback” (Cheng & Curtis, 2004, pp. 3, 9-10). These negative effects of mass writing tests can be extremely powerful. George Hillocks found that mandated writing assessments deeply affect “rhetorical stance, instructional mode and writing process” among primary and secondary English teachers in five states (2002, p. 190). Mary Lee Smith found that a mandated testing system (including decontextualized grammar tests) made Arizona primary teachers feel “anxiety, shame, loss of esteem and alienation” (1991, p. 8). As they focused on narrow test preparation, these experiences became “incorporated into the teachers’ identities and subsequent definitions of teaching” (p. 8). As the tests “de-skilled” teaching, and as critical thinking was “sifted out of the curriculum” (p. 11), Smith found that teachers became unable to “adapt, create or diverge” because they increasingly perceived the received curriculum as beyond “criticism or revision” (p. 10).

For the most part, theorists have assumed that the negative effects of mass writing tests on students, teachers and teaching are unintended consequences. But first-year writing courses have long been deployed as guarded gates that both certified writing competence and blocked
some students from entering the mainstream university (Brereton, 2015, November 11, p. 4). For educators holding simplistic constructs of writing and writing pedagogy, writing certification has often meant little more than correct grammar. City College devolved its institutional constructs of rhetoric and composing down to style and grammar between 1900 and 1920. This devolved and diminished understanding of writing was obvious in the English Department’s 1920 warning that credit for English One would “not be given unless a student can write grammatically and spell correctly” (Register, 1920, p. 94). It was reinforced in the creation of a new zero-credit remedial English Five course in “the mechanics of correct writing” in 1930 (Register, 1930, p. 222). It was apparent again in the adoption of the English 3200 grammar workbook as a standard text in 1964 and 1965. (“Syllabus,” 1964, October 3).

But the new writing tests at City College in 1965 and 1969 reflected a new urgency to enforce grammar. And the 1969 Proficiency Exam was a new kind of guarded gate at City College: a mass, high-stakes test that targeted and intended to impede or marginalize many of the black and Puerto Rican students that were desegregating the college, while buffering the largely white professorate from direct contact with many of these students. This aversive bias was evident by Fall 1969, when the English Department required either passing the Proficiency Exam or the English 40 workshop class as a prerequisite to register for some other English courses. But most of the SEEK students were placed into the SEEK writing courses, and then by English department rule, they could not also take English 40. So, unlike many other students, the SEEK students had no way around the Proficiency Exam to qualify for these other courses (Bulletin 1969, p. 69; Shaughnessy, 1970, December 10, p. 11). By the Fall of 1970, Shaughnessy complained that “the schools of Engineering, Architecture and Nursing” had followed the English department example: they were also requiring a passing grade on the Proficiency Exam
or English 40 as prerequisites for their courses (Shaughnessy, 1970, December 10, pp. 11-12). These abusive new uses of the Proficiency Exam deliberately erected more obstacles for the SEEK students (as well as other students placed into the new English One course based on initial placement test scores) and they buffered the almost completely white professorate across the college from teaching SEEK students. Once the English department created the Proficiency Exam, it could not control how other departments used it—but then, the English Department abused the test from the onset as well.

The Proficiency Exam was also intended to force writing instructors (now, for the first time at City, a lower tier of mostly temporary, low-prestige lecturers) to directly teach grammar theory, sentence correctness and timed four or five paragraph themes—or be forced to watch many of their students fail the new exam and be unable to graduate or to take mainstream courses in English, Engineering, Nursing and Architecture. The SEEK writing teachers from 1965 to 1969 had somehow successfully resisted the 1965 high-stakes grammar English One final exams (Mayes, 2016, June 29, p. 4; Shaughnessy, 1969, March 3, p. 1). This resistance had been critical to their window of opportunity to develop more sophisticated and effective pedagogies grounded in complex constructs of writing. Gayle and Bambara left City before the proficiency exam took effect. Mayes was against it. Shaughnessy (at least publicly) mocked and tried to undermine it. But the new exam went into effect and it would quickly pressure writing instruction at City to devolve back toward its fifty-year-old grammar-centric writing pedagogy. The window for change was rapidly closing.

Cook’s Warning To Respect Students as Individuals (June 1969)

Ann Cook, the City College SEEK Assistant Director in 1968-1969, wrote a seven-page memo to her colleagues when she left the program. She warned against themes and premises that
were “bound to damage the teacher’s perception of” their students (Cook, 1969, June, p. 1). These themes included students labels like ‘deprived,’ ‘disadvantaged,’ [and] ‘culturally deprived’….The onus of this labeling is subtle. The onus is placed where it does not belong—on the victim. My position is that it is very difficult if not impossible for those of us who work with minority students to be effective with them if we perceive of them using any of these qualifications (p. 1).

Cook proposed teaching training in students’ history and culture, “a close analysis of the nature of our society,” and scrutiny of “the diverse thinking of minority peoples” (p 1). In sum, Cook warned:

No matter how elaborate our services are to students, no matter how honorable our intentions, if we cannot accept them as we would our own children or relatives, we cannot give them the respect they must have if they are to gain the maximum we have to offer while we at the same time gain from them….Hence we must remember to see INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS and judge them on their INDIVIDUAL merit using our knowledge of their history and culture to understand the context out of which our students emerge (pp. 1-3). [Her emphasis.]

The Proficiency Exam created exactly the harm Cook warned against, on a systemic basis. The new grammar test did not care about the students’ history, culture, diverse thinking or individual merits. It labeled them basic based on their sentence errors in a timed test. The tests ignored larger contexts of racism and social injustice and instead blamed the victims. It pressed teachers toward a deficit pedagogy that subtly undermined their belief and confidence in their students and the students’ belief and confidence in themselves.
Shaughnessy Doubts Teachers And Calls For Top-Down Efficiency (November 30, 1969)

Ten days after the Proficiency Exam was first administered to students, Shaughnessy wrote to Volpe, frustrated at how “haphazardly, spottily” they had been trying “to solve a problem we haven’t yet defined” (Shaughnessy, 1969, November 30, p. 1). She scoffed at teachers’ pedagogical experiments as “of little use except” to individual teachers who were “the least qualified to judge” whether it was their pedagogy or enthusiasm that produced results. She noted that if they “were in a real business” they would “all be in trouble” because they had no proof as to whether their students’ writing was improving (p. 1). Shaughnessy argued that “competence in writing can be defined and measured by something more accurate or at least more objective than teacher’s feelings.” Instead, she proposed “working in a coordinated, thorough way to improve students’ writing and to devise ways of evaluating what we are doing so that our courses will become as efficient as possible” (p. 1).

Shaughnessy wanted to know “the scale of frequency and importance [of] the major writing problems of CCNY students” (p. 1). She wanted to begin to keep writing records “and devise some way of analyzing the writing that comes in to us from the proficiency exams” (p. 1). She complained that in a 1967 meeting in Volpe’s office, they had all agreed “to deal with the writing problem…. [but since] then we have introduced the proficiency exam and English 40-41, and a number of interested teachers have set about doing their own thing in each section of the course. So far as I know, that is all we have done” (p. 2). As open admissions loomed, they had not yet even agreed “how to teach the sentence fragment let alone how to approach the more serious blocks to competence” (p. 2).

Shaughnessy’s desire to preserve writing records and analyze errors in timed tests would produce her book length study, Errors & Expectations, seven years later. Her focus on data
collection, especially about student deficiencies, would soon push her writing program to focus on sentence correctness. But what is striking in this memo to Volpe is Shaughnessy’s disdain for teacher developed pedagogy, teacher research, and teacher assessments. She reduced writing course grades to mere teacher “feelings” and assumed timed tests that count student errors were more accurate, objective and efficient. Although she had publicly opposed the Proficiency Exam in 1968, her arguments in this memo to Volpe suggested that the Proficiency Exam was essentially the only professional step taken by the department over the previous two years.


In the fall of 1969, Rich taught two English One writing sections, English 1.1A and 1.1D (Rich, 1969, August 8). Her files contain no teaching materials for these courses. The numbering suggests these were versions of Volpe’s new “remedial” English One, which only carried two college credits. Rich wrote that the team-taught course had been eliminated as too expensive. As a result, she believed her choice was “to include grammar and mechanics or to find a niche elsewhere and teach verse writing” (1973, p. 260).

In Spring 1970, Rich taught two SEEK English One classes (sections English 1.8 B2 and C4). Her files contain only a few writing assignments. A March assignment called for a descriptive essay, either of a time the student was “totally alone” (referencing Wright’s “The Man Underground”) or a situation involving a large crowd (referencing Ann Petry’s “In Darkness and Confusion”) (Rich, 1970, March 2). An April assignment called for a two-page pro/con argument essay from a list of prompts, such as: “Students will take their education more seriously if they have to pay tuition.” Instructions called for students to focus on a topic question and “jot down ideas” and examples, then organize the paper (Rich, 1970, April 30). In May, Rich wrote all her students, warning them to complete the course even if there were disruptions.
due to a “national student strike.” She gave them three more assignments: a two-page pro/con argument bridging from a prompt about criticizing governments for immoral acts, a two-page personal narrative bridging from a Jerry Rubin quote asserting that schools teach competition instead of love, and a descriptive essay (Rich 1969, May).

Again, these are only fragments, but four of the five essays did not connect to literature; they were short, prompted pro/con argument, narrative and description essays. These assignments all could have been preparation exercises for the new Proficiency Exam. In particular, Rich’s March assignment closely mimicked the short, timed, prompted writing required by the new exam.

**Shaughnessy Wins Praise and a Promotion to the Tenure-Track (1968-1970)**

In the summer of 1968, Ballard praised Shaughnessy as “a splendidly innovative supervisor” and called her English courses “the heart” of the SEEK program (Ballard, 1968, August 22, p. 5). Shaughnessy’s stock was rising with Volpe too. In November of 1969, he told her that a faculty committee had recommended her promotion to assistant professor (Volpe 1969, November 25). Gross later recalled that many professors objected to promoting a grammar teacher with no Ph.D.—but he stood up and demanded they reconsider (Gross, quoted in Maher 1997, p. 116). Shaughnessy was now 46 years old, having spent the last decade as a part-time and full-time lecturer, and the decade before that as a writer, editor and researcher.

In the promotion papers, Gross noted that Shaughnessy “has become an unofficial consultant to many administrators throughout the University on SEEK problems.” He argued that Shaughnessy’s abilities had already “won her recognition, unusual for one of lecturer rank, throughout the college” (Gross, 1969, December 9, pp. 2-3). Gross explained the special circumstances:
This recommendation, which the committee recognizes, will require a waiver of the BHE By-law requirement of a Ph.D., is based upon the Committee’s conviction that Mrs. Shaughnessy has become not only an invaluable but an irreplaceable asset to the Department. She has demonstrated, as the director of the departmental Seek program, administrative ability of a very high order and has created by the force of her personality, her sensitive understanding of the [SEEK] student and her dedication to their education, the best remedial English program in the City University (p. 2).

Even for a promotion endorsement, Gross’s personal praise was remarkable: “A woman of rare and keen intelligence, poetic sensibilities, and humane warmth, she is an extraordinary teacher and a fine human being who has won the unstinting admiration of her students, her [SEEK] staff, and her colleagues in this Department” (p. 2).

Even as Gross lauded Shaughnessy as an invaluable and irreplaceable asset, her political weaknesses were also visible. As a non-Ph.D., she required a special waiver. Shaughnessy was an outsider to this department of mostly male literature scholars. Gross did not laud her as a scholar or a creative writer. Shaughnessy’s promotion and her continued advancement depended on the perception of her as an intelligent, poetic, humane woman, a caring, gifted teacher, and an invaluable, irreplaceable administrator. Her ambitions hinged on the changeable perceptions and continued good will of Volpe, Gross and the conservative English professorate.
Chapter Eleven


Throughout the late 1950s and 1960s, as southern public educators maneuvered to preserve their systems of educational apartheid, the Supreme Court issued a series of decisions that required real integration—measured not by the purported intent of reforms, but by their actual effects on students. But in 1964, Kevin Phillips, a young political scientist and Harvard law student “predicted civil rights progress through the courts would cease as soon as the locus shifted from the South to de facto segregation in the North” (Boyd, 1970, May 17). Phillips proved to be right: the Supreme Court declined to review de facto school segregation cases in 1964 (Bell v. School City), 1966 (Downs v. Board), 1967 (Deal v. Cincinnati), and 1972 (Davis v. School District).

Phillips also developed a theory that Republicans could use proxy issues to exploit semi-conscious racial resentments against black and Latinos held by blue-collar, white voters across the country. In 1966, Phillips demonstrated his theories when he guided a Republican to win a local Bronx election. In 1968, Phillips joined Nixon’s campaign and helped execute a new “southern strategy” that won Florida, Tennessee, North Carolina and Virginia (Boyd, 1970, May 17). In this way, Phillips helped to fulfill his own pessimistic 1964 civil rights prophecy. Nixon appointed four Supreme Court justices: Burger (1969), Blackmun (1970), Powell (1972) and Rehnquist (1972), creating a conservative majority on the Court that would remain in place for 44 years. This more conservative Court would refuse to remedy almost all de facto segregation in northern public schools (Keyes v. School District No. 1, 1973) as well as all de facto racial

55 “Delays in desegregating school systems are no longer tolerable” (Bradley, 1965, p. 105); segregated districts had a continuing duty to eliminate discrimination “root and branch,” as measured by practical, immediate effects (Green, 1968, pp. 437-39); Mississippi and “every school district” must end segregated systems “at once” (Alexander, 1969, p. 20).
exclusion within public universities based on admissions standards (Board of Regents v. Bakke, 1978).

**Shaping the Open Admissions Program (1969)**

In the late Spring of 1969, students across CUNY protested for racial justice, often led by SEEK students that included Francee Covington and Henry Arce and actively supported by many SEEK counselors and English teachers. These protests pushed CUNY toward immediate structural reforms and greater desegregation. It was not yet clear how the Supreme Court would assess public university desegregation programs. But it was clear that such programs would face a powerful backlash from white voters goaded by conservative politicians. As the 1969 mayoral election approached, the liberal Republican Mayor John Lindsay lost a primary challenge from Staten Island conservative John Marchi. Democrat Mario Procaccino also competed for support among working-class white voters. Fought through various proxy issues, the campaign really had “one overwhelming issue: ‘Had Lindsay done too much for Negroes, and in a lesser degree, Puerto Ricans?’” (Newmann, 1984, p. 11).

In May of 1969, City College faculty and protesting students negotiated a dual-admissions proposal which would have admitted half of City College students through essentially an expanded SEEK model and the other half based on high school grades and SAT scores (Neumann, 1984, pp. 13-14). By the Spring of 1969, Ballard and Berger were both CUNY deans. During a 1969 evening meeting in Bowker’s apartment with Seymour Hyman and Julius Edelstein, Ballard recalled: “I argued vehemently the whole evening…that we should commit the University to a sizeable increase in the SEEK program” (Ballard, 2011, p 231). Ballard was against a massive CUNY expansion because he saw no way to provide the necessary support for the new students—support which had been critical to the success of SEEK students. “But the
chancellor and others were thinking about the reaction of the white constituents of the university to such a plan” (p. 231). Indeed the dual admissions proposal produced a scathing public reaction and City politicians quickly denounced it (Neumann, 1984, pp.14-15). Now the only way CUNY could desegregate itself was through a massive expansion (pp. 15-18). Bowker asked: “Why not let them all in?” and overruled Ballard (Ballard, 2011, p. 231). SEEK was the model for success: Ballard and Berger were placed in charge of planning “academic implementation” across the University for the wave of added students who would arrive in the Fall of 1970 (Ballard, 2011, p. 232).

A Desegregated CUNY Faces External and Internal Attacks (Fall 1970)

In September of 1970, CUNY admitted 34,592 students, 77% more than the 19,559 it had admitted one year earlier. More tellingly—in 1970, CUNY admitted 54% of all New York City high school graduates; in 1969, it had admitted only 29% of them (CUNY, 1970a, December, p. 1). Although this abrupt expansion made CUNY more accessible, SEEK continued “to be the principal means by which the senior colleges are integrated” (CUNY, 1976, February, p. 2:2).

In 1970, white colleges nationwide continued to largely exclude black and brown students. A Ford Foundation study estimated there were 470,000 black American college students in 1970. Based on the 11.5% of African Americans within the overall population, a proportionate number would have been 1,013,000. Counted as a percentage of college-age Americans, this underrepresentation was even more severe (Crossland, 1971, pp. 15-16). Moreover, the distribution of those 470,000 black college students was even more troubling: Over a third, 160,000 students, were concentrated among the 168,000 total students within America’s 100 historically black colleges and universities. Another 153,000 were enrolled among the 1.92 million students within America’s 950 white public and private two-year
colleges. There were only 122,000 black students among the four million total students in America’s 400 white public four-year colleges. Most shamefully, there were only 35,000 black students among the 1.72 million total students in America’s 1,150 white, four-year private colleges (Crossland, 1971, p. 34). Referring to the Ford Foundation study, Ballard argued that even the public four-year college totals were misleading because CUNY alone accounted for over 15% of the black students, with Detroit’s Wayne State and a few other colleges also “accounting for large chunks.”

Overall, CUNY reported 26,532 black undergraduates in Fall of 1970 and 7,785 Puerto Rican undergraduates. As such, CUNY—by itself—had enrolled 8.6% (one-twelfth) of all black college students within the 2,510 white two and four-year colleges across America. The vast majority of American colleges remained almost completely racially segregated.

This larger and more diverse CUNY came at once under intense and unrelenting external and internal attacks. In May of 1969, a New York Times editorial warned that “relatively unprepared” students could never meet “the highest scholarly standards” of City College and that an “unrealistic faith in educational magic” would lead to “educational frustration.” In the Spring of 1970, Nixon’s Vice President, Spiro Agnew, led attacks on open admissions policies,

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56 (Ballard, 1973, p. 66). Ballard also denounced “social and political pressures” to place black students into two year colleges, citing the nineteen-campus University of California as an example, with black students comprising 6.1% of its community college students, 2.9% of California State University students and only 0.8% of University of California students (1973, pp. 94-95).

57 (CUNY, 1970b, December, p. 2). The Ford study found only 20,000 Puerto Rican college students nationwide in 1970 (1971, p. 13). As such, 40% of all Puerto Rican college students nationwide were CUNY students.

58 (Bad bargain, 1969, May 26). The Times editors reconsidered somewhat in November, supporting Bowker’s “compromise plan” now that it was clear that traditional applicants would not be “crowded out” and conceding that SEEK had proved that highly “motivated students [could] usually overcome past academic deficiencies if … given extra instruction and guidance” (“Open Admissions” Plan. NYT 1969, November 13).
arguing that academic standards would crumble because open admissions universities would be unwilling to fail underprivileged students (Agnew, 1970, February 12). Two months later, Agnew singled out CUNY’s open admissions policy as a “permanent and tragic loss” that would lead to a “hundred thousand devalued diplomas” (Agnew, 1970, April 13).

Within the City College English department, the most overtly angry and bitter opponent of Open Admissions was Geoffrey Wagner. Hired as a tenure-track instructor in 1954, Wagner had studied at Oxford during 1940s before earning his Ph.D. in 1954 from Columbia; by 1969, he was a full professor (Johnson, 1954, April 1, p. 3; Bulletin, 1970, p. 77). In his rambling, openly racist, sexist and homophobic 1976 polemic, *The End of Education*, Wagner attacked Mina Shaughnessy as the “Circe of CCNY’s remedial English program” (p. 129). He also attacked City College writing courses because they taught “more about injustices of society…than the use of punctuation” (p. 143). Wagner scoffed at the idea of compensatory courses, which he considered a misnomer for remediation, and he summarily dismissed the idea that “the illiterates who arrive at our registration tables…are oppressed” (pp. 142-43). More broadly, in Wagner’s view:

Remediation (as I propose to call it here, since that is what it is) has become one of the principal problems of the Open Admissions concept. Money is thrown at it recklessly. In operations like our university’s SEEK, or in our English Department’s inflated Basic Writing courses, you can see the old, self-perpetuating routine of creating yet one more program on the backs of the taxpayers” (p. 143).

**Shaughnessy Takes Charge of Composition (Fall 1970)**

Under these tremendous pressures, Shaughnessy was given a newly created title: “Assistant Chairman in charge of all composition work in the English Department. This means
that she supervises the remedial courses and will therefore be largely responsible for the future success of the open admissions program” (Gross, 1970, October 30). In early September, Shaughnessy reported her preparations to Gross. She now controlled City’s writing course placement system. Incoming students had taken a two-hour test, including both machine-graded objective questions and a timed essay. After sampling a few essays to see if the objective tests “accurately indicated… writing quality,” Shaughnessy set a cut-off point and exempted the top half of the scorers based on the objective grammar test scores without reading their essays—although she “invited [them] to take [the] English 40 [writing workshop] or literature courses” (Shaughnessy, 1970, October 3, p. 1). The returning SEEK students continued in the three SEEK writing courses; but Shaughnessy had renamed and renumbered them “Basic Writing 1, 2, 3” and she now referred to them as the “Basic Writing Program.” The non-SEEK students still followed Volpe’s 1969 system: they were either required to take Basic Writing One or invited to take the English 40 writing workshop.

All these students would eventually have to pass the Proficiency Exam. (Shaughnessy could have used the placement exam to exempt some students, but it doesn’t appear that she did so.) In all, Shaughnessy expected 767 incoming students (596 non-SEEK and 171 SEEK) to register for Basic Writing One. She expected 269 students (228 non-SEEK, 41 SEEK) to register for English 40. She had placed 285 returning SEEK students into Basic Writing Two or Three (pp. 1-2). Shaughnessy did not control the English 40 workshops and she did not analyze them. Instead she focused on the Basic Writing courses. Over 1,000 students (450 SEEK and 600 non-SEEK) would take 75 sections of her Basic Writing courses, a huge (but expected) jump from

59 (pp. 2-3). The renumbered SEEK courses were called both as “English” and “Basic Writing” courses. To avoid confusion here, I’ll continue to refer to the pre-1970 required English writing courses as English Five, One and Two. But I’ll refer to the similar new writing courses as Basic Writing One, Two and Three. I’ll call all other writing courses English 40, 41, etc.
the 400 students in 31 basic writing sections one semester earlier. The average number of students in each class rose slightly but stayed just under the SEEK 15 student cap. The department hired seventeen new “full or part-time teachers in the Basic Writing Program” (p. 3).

Under the heading “Innovations,” Shaughnessy listed the new basic Writing One course model and a new writing center that Mayes had developed—although she did not credit Mayes:

As originally planned, the course met five days a week for an hour each day. Students worked at independent desks in a room that was set aside for the workshop. For two days of the week, student tutors also attended class to help students with their writing. The semester’s assignments were broken up into units, each unit requiring a final theme. About two-thirds of the class time was spent working on these assignments under supervision. The rest of the unit was spent presenting each unit to the class and in working on special grammatical or mechanical problems (p. 3).

Shaughnessy reported that both teachers and students saw the workshop model as successful. But she asserted that the exigencies of open admissions had forced her to reshape it into a more conventional class. Class hours were cut from five to four and tutors from two to one.

Shaughnessy was also working on supplemental “outside grammar lessons” for the course (pp. 3-4). The writing center would be open every day, staffed by one full-time lecturer. All “full-time lecturers in the Basic Writing Program” were also required to “give two hours a week” to work in the Center (p. 4).

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60 (p. 2). Shaughnessy’s early estimates proved a little low. The Fall 1970 course schedule listed 70 sections of Basic Writing One, four of Basic Writing Two and nine of Basic Writing Three—83 sections in all, closer to 1200 students. (Fall Schedule, 1970, pp. 37-38). These higher numbers also matched Shaughnessy’s December report (Shaughnessy, 1970b, December 10, p. 11).
The Fall 1970 Mid-term Teacher Reports (Fall 1970)

Since 1966, SEEK writing instructors had written short narrative mid-term reports for each student (Shaughnessy, 1971, October 18, p. 1). These reports for 56 Fall 1970 sections survive, including 44 reports on Basic Writing One sections. ⁶¹ Most instructors (including Shaughnessy) included some grammar notes. But many entries ranged far beyond surface mechanics. Soliday found these reports to be “crammed with stories about students’ lives, observations about language learning, and descriptions of coursework. . .” (2002, p. 93). A rich source, they show a large group of teachers with differing approaches, all diving in to meet the needs of each student, and pushing them to become better writers. Assistant professor Kenneth Craven was among the most creative commenters; his Basic Writing One class report includes many short quotes of stellar student writing (Craven, 1970, November 11).

Shaughnessy’s report for her Basic Writing One class mixed formalist comments with hopes, worries and some touching student descriptions: “Works evenly and hard—to hard. She began trembling the other day during an in-class essay and admitted that she needs to let up. Easily meets the requirements of this course but inexperience with the language and style of textbooks and academic subjects is going to make things tough later on” (Shaughnessy, 1970a, December 10, p. 3). Shaughnessy marked only one (often absent) student as a likely “J” grade; she expected twelve to pass; she marked one as “P?” She proposed placing one student to repeat an ESL version of Basic Writing One. She marked two students as jumping to Basic Writing Three and two students to skip both Basic Writing Two and Three (pp. 1-3).

⁶¹ Mary Soliday has preserved and analyzed these reports; she kindly shared them with me.
Adrienne Rich Writing Class (Fall 1970)

Rich’s files include her Fall 1970 Basic Writing One syllabus and writing assignments as well as some notes about her readings. In late October, tragedy struck Rich and her family when her husband died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound (Dr. Alfred H. Conrad, 1970, October 20). Rich did not teach in Spring 1971 (Gross, 1970, November 24). It’s not clear if she was able to finish the semester, although she reported on the class in mid-November (Rich, 1970, November 11).

Rich’s mid-term report listed fifteen students. She marked twelve as passing and three as “P?” (1970, November 11). None were listed as likely “J” grades and all showed near-perfect attendance. Rich noted some mechanics issues; but most of her comments evaluated whether each student was an open, creative, fluid writer: “Writes carefully but minimally, does her assignments dutifully but there’s a lack of contact between her & writing. Spelling difficulties. Needs to write a lot more, loosen up, broaden out. I feel these neat, dutiful papers got her thru high school English but her work lacks conviction. Her short story, however, looks more promising” (p. 1). Rich commended an ESL student who grappled “with zest” with English and who used “language for thinking and exploring” (p. 1). Of another she wrote: “Despite some fused sentences, lack of punctuation, some spelling troubles, he is very clearly a writer, in the sense that he believes writing can express what he, uniquely, is going through” (p. 2). She wished another student “could get more in touch with his imagination in writing” (p. 1).

September, p. 1). She explained to her students that the “purpose [of the course] is to give you as many opportunities as possible to write. During the semester we will be talking about, and reading, several different kinds of writing, and you will be given assignments in each of them—for example, description, dialogue, narrative, the essay” (p. 1). Weekly writing assignments echoed Mayes: with the teacher and a tutor available to assist students, they wrote an in-class first draft on Monday, an in-class rewrite on Wednesday, and a final draft at home to be returned on Friday. Echoing Bambara and Christian, Rich also required students to journal 300 words a week outside of class in any form. Writing took up two class hours each week; the other two were “spent discussing the readings, talking over the writing… and working on the sentence as a unit of writing” (p. 1).

Rich also told students about two kinds of “[extra] help available to all students.” First, the writing center was “staffed by teachers in the Basic Writing Program” four days a week from ten to four; Rich called the center “a kind of writers’ ‘service station’ where specific problems can be worked on and discussed.” Second, Shaughnessy held Thursday “Grammar Reinforcement Lessons,… dealing with… specific aspects of grammar” (p. 2).

Rich listed no final exam. Students were required to attend class and complete the papers, journals and readings. The surviving handouts include no grammar sheets, although there was now a grammar handbook and grammar lessons. Rich also added grammar quizzes. Students had to pass “four short tests…whenever [they felt] ready….on punctuation, spelling, subject-verb agreement, and verb forms” (p. 2). The handouts include nine numbered and two unnumbered writing assignments in this order: two description essays, three dialogues, a short story, two comparison essays, and three analysis essays— ending with an argument essay supporting the statement: “Siddhartha is really a novel about education” (Rich, 1971, January 9). Each
assignment was prompted and scaffolded with different pre-writing steps. For example, a comparison essay asked students to first build a “frame” chart with five points of comparison about two things, and then develop that frame into a seven paragraph essay (Rich, 1970, Fall).

**Shaughnessy Chooses the “A, B, C’s of Correctness” (December 10, 1970)**

In December, Shaughnessy wrote Gross a remarkable seventeen-page report. Shaughnessy attached the mid-term teacher reports for the Basic Writing One classes, which she said showed: “that students…are attending class regularly, working steadily, and not only showing improvement in their writing but often producing work that is of unusual quality” (Shaughnessy, 1970b, December 10, p. 1). Noting that the teachers spoke only to “writing difficulties” in their reports, Shaughnessy observed that many students also had bigger problems with jobs and families that made “our difficulties with sentences seem somewhat fussy” (pp. 1-2). Many students also struggled with timidity, low confidence, isolation, health problems, ambivalence and disgruntlement. But, unlike SEEK students, the regular students received no emotional counseling, a serious deficiency which was obvious to “those of us who have taught in the SEEK program” (p. 2).

That said, Shaughnessy then turned to four “academic problems.” She labeled the first problem “Correctness and Motivation” (p. 2-3). Analyzing the mid-term reports, Shaughnessy discerned four types of student deficiencies. The first “and most common” flaws were sentence-level errors, including run-ons, fragments, punctuation and spelling. The second types were other sentence-level errors in “verb forms, agreement and other inflectional patterns…..” The third problem was idea development and the fourth was style—“problems most often taken up in traditional writing courses” (p .3). Shaughnessy combined all the sentence-error problems under the heading of “correctness” and she complained that they “are generally considered the
Shaughnessy saw these grammar expectations as directly tied to racist assumptions of both foes and friends: “There is, in fact, a kind of pressure to do a quick job of producing correct writing since the ability to manage Standard English is often unconsciously accepted as proof of educability, and this kind of proof is sought after by most critics and some well-wishers of open admissions” (p 3).

Openly conflicted throughout her report, Shaughnessy quickly addressed the heart of her dilemma and her solution: “Yet our sense of our students and of the skill we are trying to teach suggests that our priorities ought to be different from these pressed upon us by the exigencies of open admissions. But even if this is not possible, we must find ways of enlivening and speeding up the process of technical mastery before our students lose heart or patience” (p. 4). In these two sentences, Shaughnessy first recognized that grammar-centric instruction—which she had just derided as grounded in racist assumptions—was also wrong as a matter of both student needs and good writing pedagogy. But she at once capitulated and framed her goal as the creative and efficient delivery of grammar instruction.

Shaughnessy observed again the harm that grammar-centric pedagogy inflicted on students but then conceded to it: “Now, stimulated by the advance to college, by the exposure to new books and new ideas and by a new awareness of themselves, they find they must stop to work out the A,B,C’s of correctness. Yet the need to write papers that meet the requirements of college courses is pressing and real” (p. 4). A third time she argued against grammar-centric instruction:

Students and teachers…are caught in a kind of Catch-22 dilemma—a student can use up so much energy mastering the mechanics of English that he misses the chance of
learning how to write, but if he doesn’t master the mechanics he may not have a chance to write. Aware that real growth in writing begins when a student sees the connection between himself and the words he puts on paper, we are nonetheless tempted to forego this discovery (particularly if it doesn’t happen on schedule) and hurry on to teach the student how to sound like a college student).

Shaughnessy also argued against teaching research papers (“that most pretentious of college forms”) to students who were just learning analytical writing. “We can of course refuse to become involved in this [pretense,] but we are more likely to give him what help we can, feeling as we do it that we are in some way debasing his education in order to meet a standard we don’t agree with” (p. 4).

Then Shaughnessy waffled again and surrendered again to grammar pedagogy:

I am not of course suggesting that it is debasing education to help a student gain control of Standard English and the mechanics of formal writing, but only that the effort to do this quickly can lead to doing it exclusively, which means almost inevitably the neglect, at a crucial point, of the deeper and ultimately more important resources our students bring to the classroom.

I see no immediate solution to this problem of conflicting goals….Meanwhile, for the immediate improvement of our work, it seems to me we must try to develop more efficient and challenging ways of teaching grammar and mechanics so that we have some time left over to do something else (p. 5).

Shaughnessy estimated that the Basic Writing One teachers were already spending one-third to two-thirds of their class time teaching “grammar and mechanics.” And it was the priority at the new Writing Center as well. “This largely confines us to the structural relation between the
parts of the sentence, whereas composition is about the thought relationships between sentences and larger units [which] we encounter… more directly and naturally in discourse, and it is here that students seem to gain their momentum for writing…[and] we should not neglect this task to teach inflections….”(p. 6).

Despite her deep understanding of composing, Shaughnessy’s solution was to teach more grammar and teach it more efficiently. This pursuit of grammar efficiency would soon drive both Shaughnessy and her Basic Writing Program into an obsessive, atomized focus on diagnosing and fixing sentence errors. Inevitably, this negative focus reshaped her fundamental teaching stance. SEEK was grounded in the belief of the capabilities and potential of each individual student. But Shaughnessy’s Basic Writing would focus on diagnosing patterns of errors by students who were increasingly and collectively labeled as “Basic Writers”—and then fixing what was wrong with them.

The obvious alternative solution: 1) to resist those shallow, biased expectations, 2) to begin with writing, and 3) to incorporate grammar only at the end of the writing process as a way to improve meaningful, revised work—never seemed to occur to Shaughnessy. Yet that was exactly the solution that Bambara and Christian had adopted in SEEK’s first year. It was the solution that led SEEK teachers to reject the 1965 high-stakes grammar exam. It was the core pedagogy of the SEEK writing program that Ballard still remembers fifty years later—and that made SEEK’s 1966 first-year writing courses exciting, vibrant and challenging for SEEK students Covington, White and Wiltshire. And the SEEK writing model was effective: close to 40% of the early SEEK students, including Covington, White and Wiltshire soon graduated.

But Shaughnessy chose errors. She explained to Gross that her immediate plan was to ensure that the Writing Center (which had been inspired by the creative, collaborative Iowa
model only a year earlier) focus completely on grammar instruction. Shaughnessy would re-task the Center to “develop a more systematic way of diagnosing students’ grammatical and mechanical problems and prescribing study and test units for dealing with these problems” (p. 6). Shaughnessy hoped this change would reduce the need to teach grammar in English One classes and would allow writing teachers more time to “stimulate… conditions… to produce ‘real’ writing (as opposed to drills or exercises)” (p. 7).

The second “academic problem” Shaughnessy raised with Gross was course placement. Shaughnessy recognized that few ESL teachers recommended “homogenous groupings” but she decided that efficient grammar instruction required them anyway. All incoming students would be required to take a new, four-part placement test (grammar, vocabulary, two essays) which would enable division of all incoming students into five tiers: 1) Those with major grammar problems and ESL backgrounds would be placed into an ESL remedial writing course. 2) Those “native speakers… with basic writing problems” would be placed into Basic Writing One. 3) Those with “correct but undeveloped” sentences and paragraphs would be placed into Basic Writing Two. 4) Those needing help only with organization would be placed into Basic Writing Three. 5) “Exceptionally mature writers” would be exempt from all writing courses. At registration, students would register first for writing classes to avoid scheduling conflicts. All returning students would be placed into future ESL or Basic Writing courses based on teacher assessments (p. 11).

The SEEK writing courses began in 1965 as stretched versions of the mainstream, two-semester writing requirement which privileged writing, confidence and fluency over grammar. Some remedial sections were added in 1966, but between 1967 and 1969 there were no clear tiers and grammar received different priorities from different teachers. Mayes taught grammar
lessons in her “remedial” classes but increasingly applied them only within a three-draft process pedagogy that encouraged fluency and deferred correctness to draft three. The 1967 and 1968 ten-hour classes had also given grammar a mixed priority: they blended grammar instruction with substantial writing assignments and sophisticated reading lists. Rich considered her Spring 1969 English One class merely a continuation of her Fall 1968 English Five class. But Shaughnessy’s 1970 plan pushed Basic Writing One, Two and Three into much more distinct tiers with grammar given first priority.

In Spring 1971, Shaughnessy extended her tiered course model to all City College students, directly undermining the English 40 writing workshops (which Shaughnessy did not control) as an alternate mainstream first-year writing class. Chandler had fought for control of English 40 in 1969; now she apparently deferred to Shaughnessy. But Chandler also had proposed this exact tiered, three-course, sentence, paragraph, essay model in 1968. Shaughnessy was implementing Chandler’s conservative pedagogy. And Chandler would soon serve as the department’s Proficiency Exam Coordinator (Chandler, 1972, January 21).

In her December report to Gross, Shaughnessy also realized that the engineering, architecture and nursing schools within the College were embracing either the English 40 writing workshop or the Proficiency Exam as their writing certification standards. They had rejected her Basic Writing course grades as acceptable prerequisites and thus “exacerbated the academic penalty” for placement within her courses (Shaughnessy, 1970b, December 10, p. 11). To counter these moves, Shaughnessy suggested pressuring those schools to defer to the English Department—basically to Shaughnessy herself. She also proposed replacing the Proficiency Exam with success in Basic Writing Three as the new College standard for “certifying writing competence” (p. 12).
The third “academic problem” Shaughnessy raised was that basic writing teachers were overworked; they taught three writing courses and worked two hours each week in the Writing Center. (Presumably, Shaughnessy herself had added the new writing center hours.) She urged Gross to return to “counting hours instead of courses, which is the method used by most other departments, and to count the composition course as 6 hours, the value it was given before the SEEK program got underway” (p. 12). This may have been a subtle reminder to Gross that as little as seven years earlier, the professors had shared writing course teaching work and compensated themselves fairly to do it. Only when the SEEK students arrived had all writing courses been assigned to a new lower tier of teaching staff who could be overworked and underpaid. Shaughnessy proposed that two writing courses plus three hours of weekly work in the Writing Center be accepted as a full 15-hour teaching load (p. 12).

Shaughnessy’s fourth “academic problem” was that under Open Admissions, the responsibility for all the writing problems students displayed were to be concentrated into a single four-hour course. She offered a proposal that was “a program, not a course” (p. 16). Shaughnessy imagined a complete, 12-credit, first-semester program that ignored traditional courses and instead focused on “cogitation and expression.” Using mostly actual practice in writing, reading and speaking rather than lectures, students would learn to compare and contrast, to reason and observe, to collect and consider information, to achieve precision in their words, to debate, poll, review, interview, investigate, propose—all “in subjects that seem important” to them (p. 15). There would be some mechanics instruction, but at the same time, students would be encouraged to use tape recorders to write speaking drafts, so misguided fears about correctness did not fool them to “conclude they [were] dumb” (p. 15). A second semester “could focus upon the special ways of thinking that have grown into what we call disciplines, but again
the focus would not be on content so much as approach.” Again students would learn to see themselves “as analyzing, querying, searching, talking beings” (p. 16). Shaughnessy did not specify the type of writing, only that practice would again dominate over lecture.

In part, Shaughnessy’s description of her dream program was rhetorical, preparing Gross to approve a block course initiative she was developing—and that she would launch a year later in Spring 1972. But, there is a sad irony that runs throughout her entire memo. Shaughnessy’s dream closely described the actual 1965 SEEK program; the writing courses she described combined elements of Christian, Bambara, Rich and Mayes’ actual pedagogies. Ballard had developed and taught a similar introduction to the social science course and Shaughnessy had added an anthropology theme to her 1969 SEEK writing course. But in order to build a truly innovative program, Berger, Ballard, Bambara, Christian and Gayle had all challenged institutional assumptions and biases; they had rejected obsolete and ineffective pedagogy; they had demanded that a biased system reform itself. None of these ideas were impossible; they were within the SEEK program Shaughnessy had joined just over three years earlier. But now, clouded by a convenient myopia, Shaughnessy could not or would not see that her ideal writing courses were the very ones she was converting into a tiered grammar sequence—that she was killing her own dream.

**The Newsletter Version of Shaughnessy’s A, B, C’s of Correctness Memo (March 1971)**

In a March 1971 newsletter, Shaughnessy borrowed heavily from her December 1970 memo to Gross to report publically to the English Department and the College about her new

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62 Rich co-coordinated and taught in this Spring 1972 “interdisciplinary program” in which teachers attempted to coordinate introductory courses in psychology, political science and history, as well as writing and study skills courses for a blocked group of 55 students. Rich gathered and retained June 1972 teacher reports and wrote her own. They all had mixed feelings about the program and did not all agree on the solutions or as to whether the benefits outweighed the substantial additional work. These reports are in Box 387 of Rich’s Radcliffe archives.
Basic Writing Program. She claimed SEEK’s success as her own: “Whenever possible… SEEK has been not only the model for Open Admissions but often the actual structure that was expanded to accommodate Open Admissions students. Thus the three-semester [SEEK] writing sequence…was expanded...to include Open Admissions students as well” (Shaughnessy, 1971, March, pp. 3-4). She lauded her Basic Writing One course as “part-workshop, part-classroom, with support from in-class writing tutors (students)” and her new Writing Center as “an effective supplement for students who were having special problems in their regular classes” (p. 4).

Shaughnessy reshaped her December memo into a challenge to her department on behalf of its writing teachers and students. She repeated her criticism of pressures to quickly produce the “correct writing” that was “often unconsciously accepted as proof of educability” by friends and foes. But she argued that writing teachers sensed that “the priorities ought to be different” and it was wrong to force students “stimulated by the advance to college, by the exposure to new books and ideas and by a new awareness of themselves, [to] stop to work out the A, B, C’s of correctness” (p. 5). Completely distinguishing writing from grammar, Shaughnessy again observed that students and teachers were: “caught up in a Catch-22 dilemma—a student can use up so much energy mastering the mechanics of standard English that he misses the chance to learn how to write, but if he doesn’t master the mechanics he may not have a chance to write…. The effort to teach correctness quickly can sidetrack one into doing it exclusively, which means almost inevitably the neglect, at a crucial point, of the deeper and more important resources the students bring to the classroom” (p. 5).

Returning to her theme of implied racism, Shaughnessy added that “if it was necessary for this first Open Admissions class to ‘prove’ their…educability this semester, they have… done so overwhelmingly” (pp. 5-6). Mocking the “standards over which so many now stand
guard,” Shaughnessy concluded that the burden of proof was “shifting from students to the teachers and institutions that contract to educate these students” (p. 6).

Shaughnessy’s newsletter version of the A, B, C’s of correctness repeated several entire passages from her December memo to Gross; yet Shaughnessy completely reversed their effect. The memo to Gross promised efficient delivery of grammar instruction which gave first priority to the A, B, C’s of correctness. Her 1971 newsletter version positioned Shaughnessy as an oppositional champion for writing teachers and students fighting against unconscious racism and resisting those very same A, B, C’s of correctness.
Chapter Twelve

Shaughnessy Expands Writing, Enforces Grammar, and Validates Testing (1971-72)

In Fall 1971, CUNY continued to expand, opening LaGuardia Community College and Medgar Evers College and admitting 39,211 new first-year students across its twenty campus system, which now enrolled over 200,000 total students. Total CUNY teachers surged to 16,252 from only 14,448 a year earlier. CUNY’s operating budget rose to $381 million from $330 million in 1970. Bowker had left for California and Robert J. Kibbee, a former vice president at Carnegie-Mellon, became CUNY’s new Chancellor. The senior colleges admitted 17,308 new students plus 1,837 new SEEK students. City College admitted 2,879 new students plus 362 SEEK students (CUNY, 1971 December, pp. 1-9; 40,000 Freshmen, 1971, September 12).

Shaughnessy Triples Writing Course Placements (Fall 1971)

In Fall 1970 Shaughnessy placed about 1,100 students—just under half of all incoming students—into Basic Writing One and the English 40 writing workshop, in accordance with administration expectations that the half of incoming students with the highest high school GPAs required no college writing instruction (Skurnik, 1978, p. 12). But in September of 1971, with her tiered Basic Writing Program now in place for all students, Shaughnessy placed “2,900 [students] or about 94% of the Freshman class” into her basic writing courses (Shaughnessy, 1971, Fall, p. 2). This was an amazingly powerful and defiant act for an ambitious assistant professor who had not yet received tenure.63 The fall of 1970 and 1971 student populations were

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63 In October of 1971, Gross submitted Shaughnessy’s application for tenure a year early (Gross, 1971, October 4). I have found no direct result of this application. But Shaughnessy was promoted to Associate Professor a year later (Minutes, 1973, March 28, p. 1).
not essentially different. Shaughnessy simply recalibrated the placement tests. But she did not admit her manipulation. She claimed the placements were due to weaker incoming students, the merger of English 40 into her Basic Writing Three, more incoming SEEK students, and returning students from the preceding year (1971, Fall, p. 2). She even reported that she had cross-checked the accuracy of her fall of 1971 placements in two ways and found them to be 87 to 90 percent accurate (p. 6). Together with returning student placements, Shaughnessy placed 3,231 students into her Basic and ESL Writing courses, “an increase of 1,958 over last fall” (1971, Fall, p. 2). She divided incoming students into nine separate tiers: ESL English 0.1 (1%), ESL English 0.2 (4%), ESL English 0.3 (5%), Basic Writing One (19%), ESL Writing 1.1 (4%), Basic Writing Two (31%), ESL Writing 1.2 (3%), Basic Writing Three (27%) and exempt from all courses (6%) (p. 2).

Shaughnessy used the placement tests to effectively overrule both the College’s 1968 decision to abolish required mainstream composition and its 1965 decision to eliminate two-semester required writing. At the same time, she also replaced the competing English 40 writing workshop with her Basic Writing Three (p. 1). Only three sections of a revised English 40 (writing in the humanities) were offered (Schedule, 1971, Fall, p. 46). Two years earlier, Shaughnessy had been a temporary lecturer administering a small, segregated sub-division of the department. Now, she was arguably the most powerful faculty member in the department—or even the College: 81 faculty members taught 3,231 students in 150 sections of her basic writing courses (Shaughnessy, 1971, Fall, pp. 1, 6, 7). She controlled placement testing. Her 1971 report began with an organization chart that positioned Shaughnessy as the “Basic Writing Program

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64 In Fall 1970, excluding SEEK students, 37% of incoming City College students had high school averages under 80%; in 1971, 53% had averages under 80%; and in 1972, 49% had averages under 80%. (City College, Faculty Senate News, 1973, March, p. 1).
Director” at the top of a large administrative pyramid. The Proficiency Exam coordinator, a research assistant and a secretary all reported to her. The SEEK English coordinator and the Writing Center director reported jointly to Shaughnessy and the SEEK Program. The Writing Center now had a seven person staff, as well as 11 teacher tutors and 40 student tutors. In Fall 1971, Shaughnessy ran 150 sections of her writing courses (pp. 6-7). All other listed English courses combined totaled only 145 sections (Schedule, 1971, Fall, pp. 42-51).

By force of will, Shaughnessy engineered a genuine and astounding victory for writing instruction. From 1964 to 1969, Volpe, the Department, and the College had all pushed for systemic changes that devalued and stigmatized all required writing courses as remedial and assumed the traditional “good” students they valued would arrive as competent college writers. A sense of “academic schizophrenia” deepened the aversions of many tenure-track faculty to teaching writing and to teaching the College’s new students—leading them to abolish all required English courses and teach only electives. At once, Shaughnessy reversed most of those systemic changes and she re-established that almost all incoming students needed writing instruction. And thirty-three tenure-track English faculty agreed to teach Fall 71 basic writing courses, mostly sections of Basic Writing Three (Shaughnessy, 1971, Fall, p. 6).

But there were some costs. Shaughnessy’s unexpected placements overwhelmed the college. At fifteen students per section, Shaughnessy’s 3,231 writing course placements would have required 215 sections. She agreed to increase the maximum students in the writing courses from 15 to 23, with some sections as large as “27 and over” (1971, Fall, p. 14). In this way, Shaughnessy gave up the fifteen-student SEEK writing course limits that had been in place since 1965 and she dramatically increased the workload for all writing teachers. Shaughnessy also eliminated the last vestiges of Mayes’ small workshop course model. She forced teachers to
reduce or eliminate individual student conferences (p. 14). Shaughnessy increasingly mixed together regular and SEEK students in her writing courses, fully integrating them by fall 1970 as she expanded her version of the SEEK course model to all students.65 But that meant the SEEK students were now in writing classes of up to 27 students, far above SEEK’s fifteen student limit (p. 15). Shaughnessy also accepted deferral of all discretionary placements for incoming students advised to take Basic Writing Three for at least one semester (Bulletin 1971, p. 84; Shaughnessy, 1971, Fall, p. 2).

Shaughnessy continued to battle assumptions that her basic writing courses were remedial. By building from the SEEK model, her courses were stigmatized by perceptions that all SEEK classes were remedial. Ballard and Berger had designed most SEEK courses in 1965, including their “basic” English courses, to be challenging, stretched versions of City’s mainstream required “basic” courses. But Volpe and others refused to believe that the SEEK writing courses were not remedial. Shaughnessy might have averted these biased perceptions by crafting a writing sequence of Basic Writing One, and then the English 40 and 41 workshops—ceding control of those courses to Mirsky, Chandler and others. English 40 had been accepted across the College as a mainstream writing course. Some students could have taken stretched versions of the writing workshops to create new mainstream compensatory courses. But Shaughnessy instead expanded her Basic Writing Program and took complete control. Her constant focus on grammar and student deficiencies certainly only hardened the biases against her courses. In any event, “basic” under Shaughnessy very quickly meant not “mainstream required course” but “basic grammar skills course.”

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65 In early 1972, Shaughnessy suggested re-designating a few Basic Writing Two classes as SEEK sections to better study high rates of SEEK students with “J” grades (1972, Spring, p. 5).
Having accepted much larger writing classes, Shaughnessy defiantly demanded more resources. In her 1971 report, she complained about increased class sizes and poor room assignments (p. 14-15). In a January 1972 newsletter, Shaughnessy complained again:

Certainly the greatest peril we face at City is the limitations not of our students but of our budget…. At City College,… the number of students in basic writing classes has tripled since last fall without any commensurate increase in classroom space…. In three semesters, under grossly inadequate conditions, we have begun to see how Open Admissions might be made to work. The decision of whether it will be allowed to work now rests with those who have the power to set public priorities (p. 7-8).

Another possible cost of this writing expansion was that Shaughnessy had to manage this much larger program in ways that met her promise to Gross to deliver efficient grammar instruction—although it was possible, given Shaughnessy’s remarkable authority, that she chose to focus on grammar for her own reasons. In any event, Shaughnessy enforced sentence-error pedagogy in six ways: 1) She used more formalist course descriptions; 2) She converted the writing center into a grammar lab; 3) She required detailed new grammar reports for every student; 4) She collected folders of student’s timed writing exams in a central departmental file for reference and study; 5) She monitored writing teachers more closely; And 6) she required new mid-term and final exams—including the Proficiency Exam as a departmental final exam in Basic Writing Three.

**Shaughnessy’s Formalist Course Descriptions (Fall 1971)**

The 1971 Bulletin described Basic Writing One as “[diagnosis] of individual writing problems, practice in the sentence and paragraph” (p. 85). Shaughnessy described the course in her fall 1971 Report as
The Sentence and the Paragraph…. For native speakers of English who do not habitually or easily write formal English sentences. The difficulties with this form of English can show up, most characteristically, in subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, end-of-sentence punctuation, the placement and use of modifying structures such as adverbal and adjective clauses, and in vocabulary. Self-consciousness about these difficulties creates a further barrier to expression, cutting the student off from his own thoughts and his resources as a native speaker of English.

The course attempts 1) to give the student an understanding of the nature of his difficulties with formal English so that he can try to control them in proofreading and editing until the practice of writing and the extended exposure to formal English in lectures and books give him a genuine fluency; 2) to give him experiences with different modes of expression in writing…. (p. 3).

The 1971 Bulletin described Basic Writing Two merely as the “short expository essay” (p. 85). Shaughnessy described it as

The Paragraph and Short Expository Essay….For students who are relatively free of serious grammatical or syntactical confusions but who do not seem to have much to say. The problem is reflected in a bareness of vocabulary, an absence of sentences that suggest the complexity of real thoughts (conditionals, free modifiers, flexible punctuation, parallelism, etc.), a tendency not to see or point up the connections between statements and a loss of control over the direction of an essay when it goes beyond three or four paragraphs.

Basic Writing Three was described in the Bulletin as the “long paper” (1971, p. 85).

Shaughnessy called it “Academic Forms….For students who can write a personal essay but need
practice with assignments that are more prescriptive…. [Such students] write discursively, tend to tabulate rather than interpret information, and pay little attention to the passage or question they are asked to write on…. ” (Shaughnessy, 1971, Fall, p. 4).

Shaughnessy’s course descriptions show her slipping more deeply into formalism; although she controlled the placement tests, they were also controlling her—shaping her pedagogy, courses and beliefs. She defined each course using the student deficiencies that ranked students in her placement tests. Advancing through her tiered course sequence had become a matter of efficiently diagnosing and correcting different levels of students’ deficiencies. In a new rationale for her sentence formalism, Shaughnessy even asserted that self-consciousness about correctness limited critical thinking; amazingly, she argued that shallow thinking could be repaired by direct grammar instruction. She also equated the depth and quality of students’ critical thinking to their sentence structures and their adherence to prompted instructions in timed placement tests.

**Basic Skills Modules in the Writing Center (1971)**

Shaughnessy also fully abandoned Mayes’ 1969 Basic Writing One workshop course modeled on Iowa’s example. Instead, Shaughnessy converted the workshop space into a writing center that offering a fixed program of diagnosis and grammar modules, just as she had promised Gross nine months earlier (Shaughnessy, 1971, Fall, p. 12). Each student coming to the writing center followed the same “registration” procedure: “The student fills out an information sheet, has an initial conference with one of the staff, and is then assigned a tutor and a tutorial schedule. Once the student’s main difficulties with writing have been identified, he is given work units that have been developed in the Center for specific problems” (p. 14).
By the fall of 1971, Shaughnessy had developed a rough, fifteen-page list of 41 instructional “modules” for the center (1971, Fall, App. D). Modules 100 to 119 covered parts of speech: subjects, adjectives, conjunctions, etc. Modules 200-212 covered verbs and verb tenses. Modules 300-303 covered subject-verb agreement. Modules 400-402 covered punctuation. Modules 500-503 covered spelling. Modules 600-605 covered more sentence mechanics. Only the final module, Module 606, (reducing repetition) moved beyond sentence-level correctness. As another formalist “innovation,” Shaughnessy began to produce videotaped lectures of the grammar modules.

Shaughnessy Requires Mid-Term Grammar Reports And Monitors Teaching (Fall 1971)

Beginning in 1966, the SEEK and basic writing instructors had compiled brief narrative mid-term reports describing the progress of each student (Shaughnessy, 1971a, October 18). However, as McBeth (2007) has observed, Shaughnessy revised these mid-term reports in October of 1971. Shaughnessy wrote to the writing teachers that she understood fears about “depersonalizing…the program” and the need to find “ways of staying human.” But given the program’s new “vastness,” she was introducing “two additional ways of sharing that should help us all” (p. 1). She replaced the SEEK program narrative reports with a new 23-question form that first required teachers to assess each student’s abilities as poor, fair, good, or excellent in ten different categories of sentence errors: subject-verb agreement, verb forms, intra-sentence punctuation (commas, quotations, apostrophes, etc.), inter-sentence punctuation (fragments, splices, comma faults), pronoun reference and case, adjective and adverb forms, possessives, 

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67 (1971, Fall, p 11). By 1976, Shaughnessy began testing her first seven “videos on the sentence… on over 300 CUNY and SUNY students” and she planned to distribute them nationally with exercise workbooks as a “supplement to…or substitute for” remedial writing courses (Shaughnessy, 1976, April 5, p. 6).
spelling, syntax in simple sentences, and complex sentences, including subordinating constructions. Thirteen more questions called for specific assessments of each student’s writing, reading, speaking, attendance and class performance (Shaughnessy, 1971b, October 18).

These new grammar reports were required of all teachers at all levels. Shaughnessy had mused nine months earlier that efficient grammar instruction would create room for the more important, exciting and fruitful parts of writing instruction, but now she centered sentence-correctness in every tier of her program.

Together with this none-too-subtle administrative push towards an emphasis on formalism, Shaughnessy also announced new steps to monitor teaching through a “Teacher-Course Inventory” created by a special “inventory ‘crew’” of seven senior teachers, including Shaughnessy and Skurnick—one of whom would meet with each teacher and arrange a class visit in order to write a description of his or her teaching (Shaughnessy, 1971a, October 18, p. 2). Teachers were also required to provide statements of their teaching goals and copies of their syllabi. All this would be shared with “the staff.” Shaughnessy told teachers she recognized they were already overworked; but she believed this new information was “essential to the quality of our work” (p. 2).

**Shaughnessy Restores Departmental Exams and Accepts The Proficiency Exam (Fall 1971)**

Shaughnessy instituted new departmental mid-term exams as well (Maiz, 2012, December 13). And while she apologized to her basic writing teachers that “[f]inal exams don’t seem to make much sense in writing courses,” Shaughnessy nonetheless required timed-essay final exams in English One and Two using departmental prompts (Shaughnessy, 1971, December 17, p. 1). Each teacher could give the final exams “whatever weight they wish” (p. 1). In Basic Writing Three, in: “lieu of a final essay [exam], all students… are required to take the
Proficiency Exam, which will be given on the last day of group exams…. Teachers… are responsible for proctoring the exam for their classes” (p. 1). It was an unusual final exam: Shaughnessy merely required all passing students to sit for the Proficiency Exam; she did not require them to pass. “Since the exam certifies a proficiency level for graduation, it is not expected that all students will pass it at the end of English 3” (p. 10).

**Shaughnessy Minimizes Resistance (1967-1971)**

From 1967 to 1971, Shaughnessy minimized opposition from all sides and amassed complete authority and control over the writing courses and pedagogy at City College. Partly, this was likely due to her powerful, magnetic personality: she quickly inspired both great confidence and deep loyalty from colleagues and bosses. She was a skillful politician able to position herself as an indispensable asset and an ally to all sides. She carefully built networks of supporters. She nurtured her reputation as a writing and testing expert, a curricular innovator, and a caring teacher. A brilliant rhetor, Shaughnessy had a genius for shaping perceptions; she was both an inspiring and persuasive speaker and writer.

Shaughnessy also crafted a message that was exactly what many educators wanted to hear: old methods and values could be conserved; grammar could be taught in an effective, innovative, sophisticated and sensitive way; they could demand that non-white students accommodate themselves to traditional standards of correctness; they could maintain their academic standards and liberal self-images at the same time. Few academics really understood what was wrong with grammar instruction; they had all absorbed an intuitive understanding of grammar as children. Many academics in 1970 understood writing as merely the correct and clear transmission to the page of completely formed ideas and objective observations (Elbow, 1973, pp. 13-15). Even sophisticated writers could work intuitively without examining their
purposes, processes and shaping influences. Many teachers doubted that undergraduate writers also employed complex purposes and processes. And they doubted in any event that black and brown students did so. Emig (1971) and Perl (1979) challenged these forms of myopia, even as Shaughnessy reinforced them.\(^{68}\) As such, most educators lacked an understanding of composition and rhetoric theory that enabled them to understand the harm, shallowness and ineffectiveness of sentence error pedagogies and timed tests.

But some City College writing teachers understood the harm of grammar-centric pedagogy and were unswayed by biased assumptions. Bambara and Christian refused to teach grammar before writing or to give grammar exams. But by 1970, most City College writing teachers were temporary and marginalized teachers who were unlikely to air any disagreements with their powerful and charismatic leader or to give any comfort to their many detractors and critics. These teachers more likely quietly resisted within their own classrooms. Some moved on to teach elsewhere—as Bambara, Christian, Gayle, and Mayes had all done by the fall of 1971. Some perhaps shared their reservations privately with Shaughnessy in ways that were unrecorded or hidden.

**Rich Pushes back Against Tiered Courses and Testing (September 2, 1971)**

In September 1971, Rich did raise several strong reservations and disagreements directly with Shaughnessy. Rich had been thinking about and questioning the assumptions within the basic writing program—as she said she knew Shaughnessy had done as well. Rich listed five questionable assumptions: 1) Learning writing was “a systematic progression from one skill or

\(^{68}\) Shaughnessy argued directly that, while timed writing tests could not measure the competence of most writers, they could measure the competence of “unskilled” student writers, for whom “the conditions of writing seem to matter less than they do for more advanced writers” (1977, pp. 4-5). Following Emig, Perl’s research proved otherwise with CUNY two-year college students from 1975 to 1977. (Perl, 2015, November 14, pp. 4-6).
unit to the next, e.g. from the sentence to the paragraph to the short essay to the long research paper.” 2) Learning to write research papers should be a course goal. 3) Competent “writing is a technique which one person can transfer to another without much or any reciprocal activity.” 4) Expanded vocabulary would help a student “regardless of his present relationship to the words he is already using.” 5) The “basic skills of Standard English can be taught before the student has any fundamental awareness of his existing relationship to language” (Rich, 1971, September 3). [Her emphasis].

Instead Rich argued that their program needed to give far more attention to the way they (students and teachers) thought. “Ultimately no piece of writing is going to be better than the quality of thinking and feeling that led to its writing” (p. 1). Instead of submitting to short-term pressures of “grammar tests [and] the proficiency exam,” Rich advocated enabling teachers and students “to become more conscious of the elemental assumptions we engage in with regard to words, inside the classroom and out.” She proposed taking a longer-term view and ending tiered courses: “I have been wondering whether we are not prisoners of the English 1, 2, 3 cycle, the artificial time—and goal—divisions it sets up and the notions of measurable “success” and “failure” it creates in the minds of students” (p. 2).

Attaching an excerpt from Freire’s 1970 “The Adult Literary Process As Cultural Action for Freedom,” Rich asserted that valuable and effective relationships among students were “destructively splintered by the existing structure of our program.” She proposed abandoning the tiered structure in favor of a year-long seminar with the same class and teacher, followed by an optional third semester. In this “non-test situation” the teacher could evaluate how students might

69 (p. 1). Rich later reaffirmed her view that students must be able to trust that their writing is being read by a collaborator, “as opposed to a grading machine out to get me for mistakes in spelling and grammar” (1973, p. 269).
group together and help each other. In the first two semesters, students would develop relationships and trust, and then work in groups on different projects (p. 2). In the third semester, students could choose a single, long-term, group writing project, such as a proposal, study, group of interviews or newspaper (p. 2).

**Rich Resists Tiers and Tests in Her Classroom (Fall 1971)**

In Fall of 1971, Rich was now an assistant professor; she taught one section each of Basic Writing One and Two. Only course fragments survive, but her Basic Writing One course syllabus quietly resisted the premises of Shaughnessy’s tiered program: “This class will start from the idea that language—the way we put words together—is a way of acting on reality and eventually gaining more control of one’s life. The people in the class and their experiences will be the basic material of the course, about which we will be talking and writing” (Rich, 1971, Fall, p. 1). Rich used fewer readings than she had before: Ibsen’s 1889, *A Doll’s House and Other Plays*, Lawrence’s 1913 novel, *Sons and Lovers*, Rothenberg’s 1968 global poetry anthology, *Technicians of the Sacred*, and a dictionary (p. 1). She chose readings “in which the authors or their characters have tried to understand and criticize their situations, and move beyond them” (p. 1). The one page syllabus mentions no grammar quizzes. She assigned at least one common essay to both her basic writing one and two students, suggesting she refused to tier the courses. The assignment was to write “an essay in which you compare your wants and desires to those of your mother and father.” Rather than a prewriting chart, Rich now urged students to carefully reflect and jot down notes, then write a draft, rewrite it with corrections, additions and deletions, and then proofread it twice (Rich, 1971, October 14).
**Troubling Failure Rates (Fall 1971)**

SEEK’s stellar reputation was founded on the real success of its students. Shaughnessy justified her expanded writing course placements as necessary for student success. But in 1971, troubling signs began to emerge that Basic Writing students were struggling. Shaughnessy noted “the large proportion of” unsuccessful “J” grades awarded in her courses in 1970-71 (1971, Fall, p. 9). She listed the rates of “J” grades awarded in the Spring 1971 Basic Writing Classes, although she downplayed them as including some students who never attended the classes or who were also failing their other courses (pp. 9-10). In particular, the SEEK students were

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic Writing One</th>
<th>34.1%</th>
<th>48%</th>
<th>16.4%</th>
<th>30%</th>
<th>54.7%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basic Writing Two</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>28.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic Writing Three</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

struggling: they received 41% to 48% of the Basic Writing “J” grades although they were only 30% of the students. From this partial information, Table Four estimates the actual SEEK failure rates: close to 55% of the SEEK students did not pass Basic Writing One and were forced to repeat it. Three out of ten SEEK students were forced to repeat Basic Writing Two. Two out of ten were forced to repeat Basic Writing Three.
The “J” grade had been a key part of the SEEK pedagogy beginning in 1965, encouraging teachers to require students to repeat courses where needed without the penalties that “F” grades caused to their averages and academic standing. Ballard recorded substantial J grades and INC grades for SEEK writing students in 1967-68 (Ballard, 1968, August 22). But, as Table Five shows, Shaughnessy’s Spring 1971 Basic Writing One and Two courses showed much higher J/INC rates. For any SEEK student placed into Basic Writing One in the Spring of 1971, the odds of completing the whole writing course sequence in only three semesters were daunting.

| Table 5: Comparable Actual 1967-68 J/INC Grades and Estimated Spring 1970 City College SEEK English Course J Grades |
|---|---|---|
| SEEK English Five/Basic Writing One | Fall 1967 | Spring 1968 | Est. Spring 1971 |
| | (40/115) | (9/63) | 54.7% |
| | 34.7% | 14.3% | |
| SEEK English One/Basic Writing Two | (23/113) | (28/115) | 28.7% |
| | 20.3% | 24.3% | |
| SEEK English Two/Basic Writing Three | (22/98) | (30/95) | 22% |
| | 22.4% | 31.6% | |

Shaughnessy Moves Toward Indirect Measures of Programmatic Assessment (Fall 1971)

SEEK’s success was largely measured by the real success of its students: grades, credits earned, retention and graduation rates. Berger’s theory that failure was a mutual responsibility forced teachers to reassess and adjust their teaching whenever their students were not succeeding—forcing the program and its teachers to adopt a responsive, bottom-up pedagogy. Direct measures can be imperfect; but they are much harder to manipulate, misread or abuse than indirect measures that serve no real purpose beyond assessment. Aligning SEEK with student success also reaffirmed its function and culture as a bridge rather than a gateway program. Whatever did not serve students did not serve SEEK. But faced with low real success rates and seeking efficient grammar instruction, Shaughnessy began to move away from this direct-measure, bottom-up model toward indirect-measures and a top-down pedagogy that enforced
grammar instruction regardless of its consequences. She argued that grammar reports, placement test analysis and writing exams could indirectly measure both student achievement and programmatic success (1971, Fall, p. 9). She even cited the Proficiency Exam as a flawed but useful programmatic assessment tool:

This is the only independent measure, other than grades, that we have of our students’ writing level after the completion of [Basic Writing Three]. Although it is a far from ideal measure, requiring that students produce essays on topics they have had no time to prepare for, it offers some indication of their control of formal English and their ability to organize a short discussion on an assigned topic (p. 10).

Even as she moved toward the Proficiency Exam, she tried to lower expectations as much as possible, warning that passing rates would likely drop over time as more students with low placement test scores worked through the Basic Writing sequence (p. 10). “A student who begins in English 1 and moves after two semesters to English 3, for example, is seldom at the same level of skill as the student initially placed in English 3. The gaps in preparation, in other words, are greater than the time we have to close them” (p. 16). Yet she accepted the Exam as a “check on the efficacy of [her] program” (Volpe, 1972, p. 771).

Shaughnessy’s Plea For Patience (Fall, 1971)

Shaughnessy ended her Fall mid-term 1971 report with a powerful emotional appeal for institutional patience and flexible standards:

What standard, then, are we to use in evaluating the student who has worked steadily… and shown significant improvement, who may even at times have produced writing that, in its quality of insight and imagination, is superior to that which more easily meets the
traditional “standard.” Can we, in short, penalize the student who has kept his end of the bargain and who has succeeded in terms of his own baseline? (p. 17).

She suggested that the College view remediation [as] a process that continues far beyond the Basic Writing sequence…

knowing that, with sweat, the gap between the absolute standard and [student] performance will narrow and finally close.

This is the way every SEEK student I know has grown—by plugging, by patiently re-making habits, returning again and again to fundamentals but expanding each time the area of mastery, by reaching plateaus that look like standstills and having setbacks that look like failures—but moving, always in the direction of mastery until, finally, there is a sense of an undergirding and a feeling of control.

So confident am I of the capacity of poorly educated students to make this gain that I would not hesitate to guarantee such results if we could but suspend our institutional neurosis about standards long enough to meet these students in all courses where they are rather than where we think they ought to be and proceed to give them a good education.

(p.17).

Again, Shaughnessy’s own conflicts seemed to lurk just below the surface, especially in her warning about “our neurosis.” By the Fall of 1971, her own neurosis and growing focus on the “A, B, C’s of correctness” was pressuring writing teachers away from what she had recently realized as “the real growth in writing [that] begins when a student sees the connection between himself and the words he puts on paper” (1970b, December 10, p. 4; 1971, March, p. 5).
The Proficiency Exam Raises New Concerns (January 1972)

All the Basic Writing Three students in Fall 1971 had been first placed into Basic Writing One or Two and then advanced through the sequence. The Proficiency Exam results in January 1972 would evidence whether two or three semesters of Shaughnessy’s grammar-centric pedagogy had improved students’ grammar enough for them to produce timed, prompted writing with limited errors. Another wrinkle was that 22 of the 24 Basic Writing Three teachers were tenure-track faculty. Chandler reported the Proficiency Exam results directly to Shaughnessy in late January. In all, 67.3% of takers (506/752) passed. Almost all students with high placement test scores, unsurprisingly, also passed. Students coming from Basic Writing Three did slightly less well—60-65% passed by Chandler’s count. Worse, only about 55% of the SEEK students passed. But most troublingly, Chandler noticed that about half of the Basic Writing Three students failed to take the exam at all (Chandler, 1972, January 21, p. 1).

Shaughnessy made her own analysis, broken down by individual teacher: 24 teachers taught 26 fall 1971 Basic Writing Three classes with 603 total students. Teachers included one professor (Arthur Waldhorn), two associate professors (Marcia Allentuck and Roger Boxill), one writer in residence (Ross Alexander), one instructor (Karen Swenson), one lecturer (Raymond Patterson), and 18 assistant professors. The largest section had 27 students; the smallest had 20; the average was 23 (Percent of students, 1972 January). All the teachers appeared to resist the exam to some extent: all had some students who took the exam and some who did not; most apparently gave it little or no weight in course grades. The most compliant was assistant professor David Norris: 17 of his 21 students took the exam and 14 passed. The most resistant was assistant professor Tom Tomarken: only three of his 23 students took the exam and only one passed. Close to Tomarken was assistant professor Stanley Macebuh, who taught two sections:
only 10 of his 46 students took the exam and only five passed. Only five of Boxill’s 23 students took the exam, but they all passed.

In sum, out of 603 Basic Writing Three students, 313 sat for the exam and 198 passed it (Percent of students, 1972 January). On the positive side, 63.2% of the Basic Writing students who took the Exam passed it, close to the overall passing rate. But these students either were hand picked by their teachers or they self-selected to take the exam. The 290 students (48%) who did not take it would likely be less successful. And 115 had failed. In addition, the 405 who had not yet passed were blocked from taking advanced courses or entering special programs. For example, City College students all entered the School of Education by transfer application. But in 1971, Education required passing the Proficiency Exam as a prerequisite to transfer (Bulletin, Education, 1971, pp. 11-12).

Shaughnessy must have seen the evident harm. Half the English Three students feared the exam so much that they avoided taking it, even when there were no direct consequences for failure and important benefits to passing. Student confidence built up over several semesters of writing courses was squandered both for the students who failed the exam and for those who avoided it. Future failure rates would almost certainly climb as the avoiders were forced to sit for the exam and the failing students began to retake it. Meanwhile, faculty across the college were devising unintended gateway applications for the exam that further harmed and stigmatized the 400 out of 600 students who did not pass it after completing the basic writing sequence. If the exam was intended to validate Shaughnessy’s program, it was having the opposite effect—and that problem would grow worse when passing rates eventually declined. Writing teachers would feel increasing pressures to distort teaching toward shallow, disingenuous test preparation.
Shaughnessy Wins the Struggle Over Writing Course Placements (1972-1978)

Despite administration pressures “to reduce…the number of students assigned to Basic Writing,” Shaughnessy placed 82% of new spring 1972 incoming students into her Basic Writing courses and 11% more into ESL writing courses, exempting only 7% (Shaughnessy, 1972, Spring, pp. 1-3). Gross scrambled to find a compromise and urged reduced placements; he had hired 22 new faculty members; but then the Provost ordered him to cut seven full-time teachers, even as Shaughnessy demanded more writing sections (Gross, 1972, February 24; 1972, June, p. 2). Shaughnessy was undaunted: “I am persuaded that our high enrollment in Basic Writing courses is an accurate reflection of student needs” (Shaughnessy, 1972, Spring, p. 3). City College deferred discretionary Basic Writing Three placements again. Shaughnessy pushed back, arguing that pressure to reduce writing placements and the College’s failure to provide needed course sections both represented “a decline in the standards of the college and a disadvantage for our average and above-average students, who would be required in all other senior colleges to take a semester of writing” (p. 3). Shaughnessy also argued openly that mandatory composition courses should be formally restored (p. 4).

Shaughnessy would win the struggle over writing placements. In the fall of 1972, she transferred control of the Basic Writing Program to her colleague Blanche Skurnick; that semester, they placed 98% of incoming City College students (2,120 out of 2,165) into basic writing courses (Skurnick, 1973, p. 1). Skurnik would continue to place “no fewer than 90 percent of each entering class…into basic writing” for the next five years (Skurnik, 1978, p. 13).

Shaughnessy Stops Teaching and Receives a Carnegie Research Grant (1971-1972)

As an assistant chair, Shaughnessy was released from most teaching duties. In the Fall of 1970, she wrote a report for only one writing class. On October 12, 1970, Gross observed
Shaughnessy teach that class. She lectured on subject/verb agreement and then conducted subject/verb exercises. Gross thought the grammar exercises were “superb,” but her grammar lecture was “too theoretical” (Gross, 1970, October 20). Shaughnessy also continued her Thursday afternoon drop-in grammar lectures during the Fall of 1970.

But it is not clear if Shaughnessy taught any undergraduate classes after Fall 1970. In her Spring 1971 teaching observation, assistant professor David Buckley observed her lecture a group of “writing lab” student tutors about sentence fragments as well as “grammar, punctuation, etc.” Buckley offered only praise: “Professor Shaughnessy knows her subject thoroughly and is able to communicate that knowledge in a way that is thought-provoking and wonderfully clear. Tactful, unfailingly gracious, serious about her work (yet witty when the occasion calls for it) she is a superb teacher” (Buckley, 1971, March 4). In September, Buckley observed Shaughnessy lead a teacher discussion about “problems and techniques” in Basic Writing One and Two courses. (Buckley, 1971, October 18). In her Spring 1972 teaching observation report, assistant professor Karl Malkoff simply stated that Shaughnessy had “no class assignments this term.” Instead, Malkoff and Shaughnessy discussed her program. “I doubt there is anyone more essential to the open admissions program than Prof. Shaughnessy” (Malkoff, 1972, March 22). Shaughnessy may have taught only one Open Admissions writing class. In any event, by February of 1972, she was no longer an active writing teacher.

Yet her reputation as an exceptional teacher continued to grow. When Shaughnessy narrowly lost a Danforth Foundation teaching award, the award committee nonetheless sent her a letter of admiration (Chandler, 1971, March 1). President Marshak added his own note of admiration: “Amid the multitude of problems we face at The City College, one of the truly bright spots is the work you have been doing with our SEEK and Open Admissions students. Clearly
we are engaged in a pioneer effort with national implications” (Marshak, 1971, March 18). Shaughnessy was now showcasing and exporting her basic writing model. In late 1971, Berger thanked her for giving an “excellent presentation and stimulating program” to a group of English teachers and Marshak thanked her for presenting her program to a “Washington delegation” (Berger, 1971, November 22; Marshak, 1971, November 19).

Gross reported that Shaughnessy described her program in April, 1972 to an English department conference and then at the Four C’s conference in Boston. She presented it again in May to a team evaluating City College (Gross, 1972, June, p. 2). In Gross’s view, the “requests that we continually receive to present the basic writing program to so many urban-centered departments make it clear that we have created a model for others” (p. 2). In March 1972, Shaughnessy claimed that “[i]f we are to judge by the number of inquiries and visitors we get from other colleges, Canadian and English as well as American, and by the kinds of questions they raise, our experience has value for others. Within the University, our program has served as a model for other colleges, and our materials have circulated without our permission (1972, March 8, p. 4).

In the spring of 1972, Shaughnessy applied and received a Carnegie Foundation grant to write what would become her 1977 Errors & Expectations. In her proposal, Shaughnessy explained her decision to join SEEK in 1967:

I came because as a “regular” college English teacher I had become interested in the plight of the black students I encountered in my classes (generally students on academic scholarships)….I had noted that many of their “mistakes” were systematic, that they echoed some other version of English that at certain points collided with the prescribed system, that, in short, many of their problems with written English were rooted in what
they already knew rather than what they didn’t know, a fact that had important implications for a teacher.

I had also noted, however, that teachers of English, in their deep linguistic conservatism, tended to be fatalistic about students with certain types of writing difficulties. Seldom called upon to teach or examine the elements of composition to students whose linguistic education had not already been reinforced by exposure to families and communities that used standard English, the teachers were at a loss to know how to begin teaching a skill, the rudiments of which they had never analyzed. They tended, therefore, to give up on such students almost at the sight of their first papers. And these expectations of failure were, of course, generally fulfilled (Shaughnessy, 1972, March 8, p. 2).

Shaughnessy described SEEK, the 1969 student protests and Open Admissions as “several different kinds of revolutions” that had shaped her writing program—revolutions that could be productive for “a subject as tradition bound as college composition” (p. 2-3). Then she concluded: “But revolutions can also be wasteful, forcing upon people more experience than they can analyze, more insights than they can act upon, and encouraging a kind of experimentalism that springs from shallow roots and spreads, without direction and control, often at the expense of what was truly valuable from the past” (p. 4).

Here was the heart of Shaughnessy’s pitch for Basic Writing. She knew that culturally constructed racism led white English teachers who already deeply valued grammar to judge black students as inferior and uneducable, conflating standard grammar with intelligence. But Shaughnessy’s solution was to embrace the past (grammar instruction) rather than experiment with wasteful, confusing new insights; her answer was to impose direction and control to conserve old values and teach grammar in a more sophisticated, caring way.
Shaughnessy proposed a three-part research project to Carnegie. First she would study her collection of student placement essays and other essay exams to develop an “inventory of problems.” She had already “developed a rudimentary version” which she attached as a ten-page outline, beginning with a six-page list of sentence-level errors (pp. 9, 13-22). Her larger inventory would be comprehensive; it would weigh the frequency and importance of errors; it would provide examples and correlate connections between errors (p. 9). In stage two, she would study actual “students in the process of writing [and] working on specific difficulties.” In stage three, she would design targeted grammar classes using the more sophisticated diagnosis tools developed in stages one and two (p. 10).

Shaughnessy would never attempt stages two and three; she would instead take four and a half years to complete stage one, analyzing 4,000 placement test essays written by City College applicants from 1970 to 1974 in her 1977 Errors (Shaughnessy, 1977, p. 4).

Carnegie soon approved Shaughnessy’s grant. She obtained a one-year leave of absence and left her administrative duties to become a full-time researcher. Shaughnessy would extend her leaves from City College until her death. As of the Fall of 1972, Skurnick became the new “Assistant Chairman of Composition” (Gross, 1972, May 8). However, Shaughnessy continued to act as the basic writing’s program’s unofficial leader.

**Writing Proficiency Exams Appear In American Schools and Colleges (1966-1980)**

Minimal competency assessments spread quickly across American public school systems during the 1970s. These tests were not completely new to American (or New York City) public education: New York regents tests had pioneered competency and achievement testing in elementary schools in 1865 and in high schools in 1878 (Britell, 1980, p. 25). But by the mid-1960s, most New York City students did not take the regents tests and large-scale competency
testing was still rare elsewhere. Then in 1966, the landmark Coleman Report, investigating public school compliance with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, surveyed and evaluated schools not only in terms of their instructional resources, but also their results—as measured by student achievement test scores (Ravitch, 2002, pp. 2-3). Sociologist James Coleman used test scores even though he recognized they were possibly invalid predictors of future success, culturally biased measures, and determined largely by social and cultural backgrounds (Coleman, et. al. 1966, p. 218).

Initially spurred by these civil rights concerns, minimum competency testing systems also embraced new results-oriented social policies as well as old social policies that limited public assistance to minimal standards (Cohen & Haney, 1980, pp. 5-12). They were also promoted by increasingly powerful mass testing companies (White 2001; Huot & O’Neill, 2009, p. 3). Their rapid growth was also fueled by a new “literacy crisis” which led Newsweek in December of 1975 to wonder “Why Johnny Can’t Write” and a “back to basics” national trend which stressed teacher accountability and led to the introduction of “local, state and national assessments of learning” (Squire & Britton 1975, p xii). Writing minimum skills testing systems would be in place, under development, or under consideration in thirty-eight states by 1980 (Jaeger & Tittle, 1980, p. vii). In April of 1973, the New York State Board of Education began to study high-stakes graduation tests (Nyquist, 1976, March 9) and New York State approved reading and mathematics high school graduation tests in March of 1976—pressed by CUNY and in part to dissuade CUNY from ending open admissions (Vidal, 1976, March 27).

Colleges had long used minimum-skills entrance, placement and course exit exams in different forms. But collegiate large-scale minimum-skills certification exams were rare until white colleges began racial desegregation in the late 1960s and 1970s. In 1971, ten years after a
federal judge ordered the University of Georgia to admit Hamilton Holmes and Charlayne Hunter, its first two black students, (A look back, 2011), Georgia was the first college system to begin to implement proficiency tests on a large scale (White, 2005, p. 31). After trial testing in 1971, Georgia developed a single coordinated minimum skills proficiency reading and writing test program for sophomores across its thirty-three campuses (Ridenour, 1980, pp. 338, 343; Pounds, 1980, p. 327). They quickly “affected instruction and curricula throughout the university system” (Rideneur, 1980, p. 333). Soon, the University of Georgia created additional basic skills tests that it used as freshman placement and course exit tests (p. 332). By 1978, Georgia abandoned its open admissions policy and also used the minimum skills tests as admissions tests (p. 334). In April or May of 1973, California State University implemented mandated writing course exit tests (White, 2001 p. 315). Edward White later recalled that the California English department chairs collectively embraced new writing course exit tests in 1972 in part because they were all literature professors who understood nothing yet about writing process, in “the days before composition studies” (White, 2001, pp. 310, 315). In 1981, California State University expanded its use of writing tests, implementing its “Graduation Writing Assessment Requirement” at its 19 campuses (White, 2005, p. 31).

At CUNY, City College’s English Department began to debate a new graduation writing Proficiency Exam in 1965, within days of the approval of the SEEK program and at a time when significant numbers of students began to transfer to City from CUNY’s new community colleges. As SEEK rapidly expanded, the English Department approved the Proficiency Exam in 1968 and implemented it in late 1969—just before the arrival of the first Open Admissions students. Queens College had a composition course exit exam/proficiency exam in place in 1968 (Mulholland, 1968, August, p. 8). Hunter College launched their rising junior writing exam in
Brooklyn College, due to the active resistance of Kenneth Bruffee, did not approve a certification exam until mid-1975 (Brooklyn Faculty Council Minutes, 1975, May 27).

Shaughnessy’s Conflicts About the Proficiency Exam (1971-1972)

In 1972, the Proficiency Exam was not entrenched or powerful. Similar tests were still rare in other college systems. Brooklyn and Hunter did not yet use them. Shaughnessy had seemed deeply conflicted about it. In 1968, Shaughnessy mocked traditional writing exams as “attic furniture.” In December of 1969, she seemed to prefer the Proficiency Exam to assessments based on teachers’ “feelings.” In December of 1970, she urged Gross to abolish the exam. In 1971, she accepted it as a required exit assessment for her Basic Writing Three Course, but called it a “far from ideal measure” (Shaughnessy, 1971, Fall, p. 10).

In early 1972, Chandler (then the Proficiency Exam coordinator) suggested scrapping it: “whatever we decide to do about the Proficiency Examination, a better system of checks on students progressing through Basic Writing 1, 2, and 3 is probably needed and is, I believe, being created….I suspect we should not give up the exam entirely until we are more certain that most students finishing [Basic Writing Three] can write with a suitable degree of confidence” (Chandler, 1972, January 21, p. 2). Eliminating the Proficiency Exam would have eliminated a great burden for many City College basic writing students, especially the SEEK students who had the lowest passing rates. It would have restored writing certification to teacher judgments within writing course grades. It could have returned assessment of Shaughnessy’s program to measuring real, direct student success. In 1972, Shaughnessy wielded remarkable power within the College. But she did not fight the exam.
By July, Chandler was becoming more comfortable with the exam. Opining that it served “a useful purpose,” she recommended in a draft report that the exam “be retained for at least another year until the last of the students who entered college when no writing was required have been graduated. The examination should also probably be retained for a while as a check on the basic Writing Program” (Chandler, 1972, July 5, p. 5). Chandler sent the draft report to Shaughnessy and Shaughnessy requested six significant edits and deletions; but she did not ask Chandler to take a tougher line on the Proficiency Exam (Shaughnessy, 1972, August 7).

**Chandler Recalibrates The Proficiency Exam (May to July 1972)**

In July of 1972, Chandler reported the May Proficiency Exam results and she found surprising good news for the Basic Writing Program: a group of mostly basic writing students had just done slightly better (80% passed) than a group of pre-open admissions seniors (79% passed)—a potential symbolic victory (Chandler, 1972, July 5, p. 1). The overall passing rate was higher than in January (80% versus 68%) and Chandler explained that the reason was that the test graders had “made compromises to accommodate the real disabilities of students” (p. 4). In January, Chandler had observed a large group (171/752) of “near passes.” These borderline failures would have increased the passing rate for the Basic Writing Three students up to 79% and the SEEK students up to 69% (1972, January 21, p. 2). In the May Exam, the graders again found many papers with “marginal” mechanics or that did not “develop, organize and express ideas at more than a minimal level of competence (1972, July 5, p. 4). But now they passed many of those marginal papers, consistently failing only about one in five. Chandler wrote that “it would be dishonest to deny that our standards are lower” (p. 2). “Although ardently wished for…complexity of thought and rigor of argument are not insisted upon. Mediocrity will do” (p. 3). In Chandler’s view, the passing “point [could] be raised or lowered, but the test remains fair
as long as the examiners all, as they now seem to do, maintain a similar standard” (pp. 4-5). In short, Chandler admitted to manipulating the scores (and lowering standards) in order to pass more students: many of the failures/near-passes in January became passes in July.

Of course, the cut-off scores on any mass writing test always can be easily manipulated (Isaacs & Molloy, 2010, p. 530). But test administrators know that admitting their results are arbitrary will undermine confidence in the tests. Shaughnessy had just raised the cut scores on the placement tests as a political power play to almost triple her writing course placements. But she denied manipulating the tests. Now Shaughnessy carefully suggested edits and deletions to the overly candid Chandler report to omit or conceal the lowered scoring standards on the May exam. Five of Shaughnessy’s six edits/deletions served this purpose—although she again did not admit it. Where Chandler wrote that it was dishonest not to admit they had lowered standards, Shaughnessy advised deleting the admission: “It does not seem to me necessary to get into the matter of ‘standards’” (1972, August 7, p.1). Shaughnessy also advised deleting Chandler’s admission that although they wished for complex thought, “mediocrity will do” because it was needlessly cruel and repetitive (p. 2). Where Chandler again referred to compromises, Shaughnessy advised:

Again the term “compromises to accommodate the real disabilities of the students” suggests the students are stuck with these problems. I would delete this sentence and add to the preceding one: “The examiners have attempted to maintain standards in a realistic manner, recognizing that all errors are not of equal significance and that maturity of expression is not likely to develop within the first year or so of college” (pp. 2-3).

Even as Shaughnessy coached Chandler about protecting her grading process from criticism, Shaughnessy also explained that the result for the basic writing students was more complicated
than the overall 80% pass rate, even with Chandler’s relaxed grading standards. Those students placed into only one semester of basic writing had almost a 90% (371/415) pass rate. Students placed into two semesters of basic writing had almost an 81% (331/411) pass rate. But students who took all three semesters of Basic Writing One, Two and Three had only a 53% (50/95) passing rate (p. 3). (They did not discuss how many students failed/refused to take the Exam.) In Shaughnessy’s view,

the Proficiency Exam . . . still has many of the shortcomings of in-class examinations, especially for students with hang-ups about exams (that is, almost all “remedial” students). It is not unusual, for example, to have a student who performs well on writing assignments in class fall down in this kind of examination, where the stakes are much higher. This exam tests the ability of students to write under pressure; it does not test their “over-all” ability and should not therefore, be the basis on which we evaluate the whole achievement of a student or of the Basic Writing Program (p. 2).

Shaughnessy understood the Proficiency Exam was both unreliable and invalid— in part because it was a high-stakes test. She also knew Chandler was lowering the passing standards on the exam. Yet, even with relaxed grading, Shaughnessy could see that the exam was targeting those students with the lowest placement test scores. Yet, despite these flaws in the test and its increasingly obvious harm to her students, Shaughnessy did not reject it.

**Shaughnessy Embraces the Proficiency Exam (November 20, 1972)**

In October 1972, Dan Berger, a young researcher in the City College Office of Research and Testing (ORT), published a report in which he concluded that taking and passing Basic

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70 In evaluating the consequential validity of an assessment, it is possible to view a test as targeting populations of test-takers through disparate impacts that reflect structural biases even in the absence of intentional biases by the test designers and administrators (Griggs v. Duke Power Co., 1971; White, Elliot & Peckham, 2015, p. 22; Poe, et. al, 2014).
Writing One did not improve student grades in later courses or make them more likely to remain in college. The ORT had identified a group of students who, in the chaos of Open Admissions, had been placed into Basic Writing One by Shaughnessy and/or into one of two reading/study skills courses, but then were able to bypass the reading and writing courses through a registration glitch. The ORT compared the overall grades and retention rates of the bypass students against those of the students who took and passed the writing and/or reading courses. As an added measure, ORT broke out grades within a group of ten humanities and social sciences courses to create what they called a “Verbal” GPA; they tracked that too. And they broke out each group into sub-groups of low medium and high high-school GPAs, writing placement test scores and reading placement test scores (Berger, 1972, October, pp. 1-4). ORT found that reading courses helped some students earn higher averages than the bypass group, but found no benefit to Shaughnessy’s Basic Writing One course. The students who bypassed it had comparable grades and retention rates (pp. 5-9). In short, students were better off bypassing Shaughnessy’s course.

The ORT study report drew large conclusions on small and shaky evidence; some of its student samples were very small; the two groups were not comparable in several ways; everyone knew that the Fall 1970 semester had been chaotic. Shaughnessy could have dismissed the ORT study or brushed it off with a limited response. But the ORT had directly attacked Shaughnessy’s Basic Writing One course, her high overall writing course placements, and the value of her entire program. It was especially grating to her that they found the Freshman College Skills class to be more valuable than her basic writing course (Maiz, 2012, December 13). So Shaughnessy carefully assembled a response (Maiz, 2013, November 10).

With help from statisticians, Shaughnessy challenged ORT’s methods and conclusions. Her statistical critique primarily attacked the overall comparisons between the groups because
the bypass group had better high school grades and placement test scores (Evaluation, 1972, November 20, table I). Breaking down the groups by GPA levels, the ORT data showed that Basic Writing One did slightly improve retention and college grades for those students with the lowest high-school grades. But even this friendly evaluation found no benefits of Basic Writing One for the students with high-school GPAs over 77.5 (Evaluation, 1972, November 20, Table II, Table III). Shaughnessy needed hard numbers to fully counter the ORT’s gloomy “multiple regression” analyses. But she could not prove that her courses improved grades or student retention. She likely had little hard evidence of success even within her courses; there had been high rates of “J” grades, especially among SEEK students.

And so, in a reversal of her recommendation to abolish the exam in December 1970, despite the harm she knew it was already causing to many students, especially SEEK students, and although she had deep reservations about the exam’s validity and reliability—on November 20, 1972, Shaughnessy publically embraced the Proficiency Exam as a valid writing assessment. In a memo to the “Open Admissions Working Committee,” she wrote: “Thus the Proficiency Examination, concluding the Basic Writing [sequence,] simultaneously ‘tests’ the student’s ability to write as he completes this sequence and the success of the Basic Writing instruction he has received.” Shaughnessy went so far as to claim that the Proficiency Exam produced “advanced” writing: “This examination is composed, administered and read by members of the English Department… who will presumably judge as competent only the kinds of writing which they would find acceptable in their own advanced courses” (Shaughnessy, Skurnick & Maiz, 1972, November 20, p. 4).

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(Shaughnessy, Skurnick & Maiz, 1972, November 20, p. 4). Although Skurnick and Maiz were listed as co-authors, Maiz remembers that she had no part in drafting it and Skurnick’s input was limited. Shaughnessy was the principal drafter. Maiz recognizes now that the document was produced on Shaughnessy’s typewriter. (Maiz 2013, November 10).
Shaughnessy also had been experimenting with objective tests as placement tools.\textsuperscript{72} As of Fall 1972, Shaughnessy planned to place two-thirds of incoming students solely by objective test scores, reducing the placement essay reading load to 1,000 essays; she hoped to increase placement by objective tests in the future (1972, Spring, pp. 2-3). Now, in her response to the Berger Report, Shaughnessy also suggested objective tests were valid writing course exit assessments:

We test the student’s grasp of standard grammatical concepts initially in the objective grammar test given to entering students as part of the placement exam. A semester later, if the student has been placed into English 1, his understanding of the principles of agreement, punctuation, verb form, and spelling will determine whether or not he will go on to English 2. Thus at one point in our sequence, we use those aspects of writing that lend themselves to objective testing as a primary evaluative tool (1972, November 20, p. 5-6).

Even as she validated all these tests, Shaughnessy’s deep conflicts again burst to the surface. She struggled with her own formalism, as she sought to define “effective writing” beyond “perfect mastery of…grammar”:

Notions of “clarity,” “organization” and “content” readily spring to mind [but we must] determine what each has to do with choosing words, and making sentences, paragraphs, and ultimately long papers…. we have discovered that the weakness of traditional approaches to writing is that they concern the written word rather than the process of writing. This is not to dismiss these approaches….But nobody would define effective

\textsuperscript{72} A surviving 1971 nine-page, multiple-choice placement test includes these categories: subject-verb, run-on sentences, pronouns, verb forms, parallel construction, logical connectives, vocabulary and paragraphs (City College English Placement Examination, 1971).
writing as “properly processed content” or any such thing. If we are to define
effectiveness, we cannot divorce the writer from his text…. Evaluation of writing courses
will serve no purpose unless it helps us to create better writers…. whatever evaluations
are made should address themselves to the writing process itself” (p. 5).

Remarkably, Shaughnessy espoused a complex writing process pedagogy as a central
requirement for any writing assessment while at the same time she validated a timed, prompted
writing exam—the very same exam which she had rejected as invalid, unreliable and harmful a
few months earlier.

Despite all her misgivings, Shaughnessy had pushed her new Basic Writing Program
during 1971 and 1972 toward the efficient delivery of grammar instruction that she had promised
Gross in December of 1970. Now, although no longer a writing teacher or a writing course
administrator, Shaughnessy redefined the entire Basic Writing Program and all its students as
fairly measured by this single timed-essay test: writer and process utterly divorced from product.
Her reversal soon would have profound effects for her program and beyond. The Proficiency
Exam would now be the principal evaluative tool of the Basic Writing program; Shaughnessy
had fully authorized City College to use it to judge her program, its teachers and its students.
Chapter Thirteen

The Consequences of Capitulating To the Net of Numbers (1973-74)

In April of 1973, Shaughnessy sent a marked up copy of the New Orleans CCCC's convention program to Ballard and Berger. She praised the impressive “quantity and quality” of participation by CUNY teachers who had added “a kind of authority and imagination that [was] becoming widely respected” (Shaughnessy, 1973, April 8). Shaughnessy also enclosed a copy of her talk, “Open Admissions and The Disadvantaged Teacher,” where she worried that Open Admissions seemed doomed by a narrow “perspective of shrinking budgets and growing pessimism” that “was deep-rooted even before any of the new students had stepped on our campuses” and which produced a “literature of pessimism” in “the language of a prestigious group of social scientists” who refused to hear larger truths just as earlier scientists had heedlessly built “an atomic arsenal” (1973, April 5, pp. 1-2). She complained about pressures to bow to “attrition rates, grade-point averages, or objective tests” (p. 3) while she welcomed any measure “that informs qualitative judgment without dominating it” (p. 7). Clearly, Shaughnessy was still angry about the ORT attack six months earlier.

But Shaughnessy reshaped her anger into a larger parable about the struggle of caring, “disadvantaged” writing teachers to resist myopic, heartless technocrats, the media and policy makers who dipped “into the reservoir for the numbers they need” (p. 2). Deeply buried conflicts quickly emerged. She worried that writing teachers might “become easy converts to the new language [of numbers], vesting it with more authority than the social scientists themselves could claim for it” (p. 3). But she, too, had manipulated numbers when she recalibrated placement test scores, and then again when she embraced Proficiency Exam scores that she knew both had no

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Shaughnessy published an almost exact copy of the speech as a journal article (Shaughnessy, 1973). Here, I refer to the original speech she sent to Ballard and Berger.
real value and would soon block student success. Only a writing teacher and composition scholar could have validated the Proficiency Exam as a competent measure of advanced, college-level writing. Social scientists could not have done so.

Shaughnessy recalled a City College student named Cora who had written a placement test full of errors and then three years later wrote another test with an impressive error count reduction “from 12 to 2” (pp. 4-5). Shaughnessy argued that Cora’s story was more important than her reduced errors—but Shaughnessy couldn’t remember it: “Looking back, I recall that she went through many crises that are now blurred in my memory….We have been trained to notice what students learn, not how they learn it, to observe what they do to writing, not what it does to them” (p. 6). Shaughnessy had only Cora’s grades, some placement scores and essay tests: none of her teachers had logged anything about Cora as an individual; her prompted test essays offered little assistance. Shaughnessy did note that, after four years of juggling work and school, Cora dropped out to go to night school somewhere; Shaughnessy was angry that she would be counted as a drop out despite all she learned (p. 5). But Shaughnessy did not consider how all the writing tests had added to Cora’s burdens—what writing at City College had done to Cora. And Shaughnessy did not explain why Cora, three years after entering City College, was still taking timed-writing tests.

Considering her larger theme and voicing her deep conflicts, Shaughnessy wondered:

In how many countless and unconscious ways do we capitulate to the demand for numbers?.... In how many ways has the need for numbers driven us to violate the language itself, ripping it from the web of discourse in order to count those things that can be caught in the net of numbers. How many young men and women have turned from
the wellsprings of their own experiences and ideas to fill in the blanks of our more modest expectations? All in the name of accountability!

But accountability to whom?.... Not to ourselves, who must teach for quick pay-offs that can be translated into numbers so that the ranking and winnowing of human talent can go on apace…. We cannot teach under such constraints: our students cannot learn (pp. 3-4).

In many ways, as she seemed to sense, Shaughnessy had already capitulated to the “net of numbers.” Almost every change Shaughnessy had made to her Basic Writing Program had pushed writing courses away from the two-way learning of Bambara and Christian toward endless error counting and grammar tests. She had demanded a focus on quick pay-offs, even as Rich urged her to consider a long-term, student-centered, collaborative approach. Rather than study actual students and their writing processes, Shaughnessy had chosen to study test responses, analyzing the errors in thousands of timed, prompted exam responses. And she had validated such timed writing tests as a more important and more valid measure of students’ writing ability than teacher assessments of the work they did within actual writing courses.

**The University Tracks Student Success (1971-1974)**

Shaughnessy and Ballard had reason to worry that compensatory courses were under close scrutiny. As early as April of 1971, CUNY conducted a “comprehensive review of Open Admissions and its supportive aspects” and asked all college presidents to produce four kinds of information about the Fall 1970 incoming students, divided into tiers based on students’ high school GPAs: attrition rates, academic standing, credit loads and remediation. “How was the attendance in the remedial courses? Did these courses help?” (Edelstein, 1971, April 3; Chiesa, 1971, April 3, p. 1). But although Shaughnessy scoffed at “retention rates [and] grade point averages” in her 1973 speech, they were real measures of success with tremendous consequences...
for students. Whether Cora graduated or dropped out would shape her opportunities and challenges for the rest of her life—far more than what she learned in any course.

CUNY administrators, including Ballard, carefully monitored student success and failure. In April 1971, Bowker, Ballard and other Deans received a report of one-semester attrition rates at each senior and community college. In late 1971, Ballard sent Kibbee a detailed breakdown of one-year retention and grade information at each senior college for the Fall 1970 students with low high school GPAs (Ballard, 1971, November 12). These direct measures of student success and failure were not tricks as Shaughnessy suggested; they gauged the ultimate success of open admissions: whether it was a bridge to success or a revolving door.

By June of 1974 the Fall 1970 students had completed eight semesters; CUNY published a detailed report of their progress. As summarized in Table Six, graduation rates were low across the senior colleges and they were especially low at City College. But many students were continuing to pursue their degrees beyond eight semesters and City’s combined eight-semester

| Table 6: Graduation and Retention Rates For CUNY Senior College Incoming Fall 1970 Students After Eight Semesters Spring 1974 With Breakout By High School GPA (From Kaufman & Botwinick, June 1975, Tables 3 to 6) |
|--------------------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
|                                                   | All Eight Senior Colleges | City College | Brooklyn College | Hunter College |
| Total Students                                    | 19,754          | 3,093          | 4,362           | 3,091          | 3,458          |
| Total Students Graduated after Eight Semesters    | 4,236 (21.4%)   | 461 (14.9%)    | 1,219 (28%)     | 644 (20.8%)    | 898 (26%)      |
| Total Retained and Graduated                      | 56.8%           | 57.2%          | 62.2%           | 57.2%          | 66.4%          |
| Ret. & Grad. HSGPA 80 & above                     | 67.1%           | 65.2%          | 70.1%           | 60.6%          | 71.4%          |
| Ret. & Grad. HSGPA 75-79                         | 51.4%           | 51.8%          | 55.5%           | 46.4%          | 57.9%          |
| Ret. & Grad. HSGPA 70-74                         | 42%             | 48.1%          | 44.2%           | 36.2%          | 40.9%          |
| Ret. & Grad. HSGPA below 70                       | 36.1%           | 42.6%          | 33.2%           | 30.3%          | 44.7%          |

74 On average, the senior colleges lost 9.1% of their Fall 1970 students in one semester, ranging from John Jay (23.1%) to Queens (5.5%) and Brooklyn (5.9%). City lost 9.5%. (Weingarten, 1971, April 2, Table I).
Retention/graduation rates were comparable to the other CUNY four-year colleges (Kaufman & Botwinick, 1975, June, Tables 3 to 6). In addition, City retained many students with very low high school GPAs. Much of the report focused on dividing students into tiers based on their high school grades. A pattern was clear: senior college students with lower high school GPAs were more likely to drop out. There were other troubling trends. As summarized in Table Seven, students from poor black and Puerto Rican neighborhoods were far more likely to drop out than students from middle or upper class white neighborhoods. Men were more likely to drop out than women. And the retention rates for all groups were slipping lower with each new class.

Something wasn’t working.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Students</td>
<td>75.5</td>
<td>73.0</td>
<td>70.0</td>
<td>64.9</td>
<td>59.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Men</td>
<td>75.2</td>
<td>70.7</td>
<td>69.6</td>
<td>64.3</td>
<td>57.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Women</td>
<td>77.7</td>
<td>75.5</td>
<td>72.0</td>
<td>67.8</td>
<td>62.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black, PR; below $8,000</td>
<td>71.2</td>
<td>66.9</td>
<td>63.5</td>
<td>57.2</td>
<td>50.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black, PR $8,000-$11,999</td>
<td>75.9</td>
<td>73.9</td>
<td>69.0</td>
<td>64.9</td>
<td>58.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White; below $8,000</td>
<td>75.1</td>
<td>68.6</td>
<td>65.3</td>
<td>63.0</td>
<td>55.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White; $8,000-$11,999</td>
<td>79.2</td>
<td>75.0</td>
<td>72.6</td>
<td>68.8</td>
<td>63.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White; above $12,000</td>
<td>79.5</td>
<td>77.1</td>
<td>75.6</td>
<td>71.2</td>
<td>65.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The problem was how to read the growing evidence that many students were struggling.

By late 1971, “open-admissions” students had become a fixed and derogatory label for all CUNY senior college students with high school GPAs below 80 and all CUNY community
college students with high school GPAs below 75. (These were approximately the students who
would have been excluded before the Fall of 1970.) During the first year of open admissions,
29.6% of these students dropped out from senior colleges and 40.1% from the community
colleges (Drop-out, 1971, November 29). Conservative enemies of desegregation and broad
access saw vindication of their assumptions that the new students were deficient, illiterate, and
otherwise inferior.

By 1972, Ballard was battling with CUNY sociologist David Lavin, CUNY’s director of
open admissions research, about how to interpret failures among at-risk students. Unlike
Shaughnessy’s dark depiction of social scientists, Lavin was neither an uncaring technocrat nor
an enemy of open admissions. He would spend the rest of his career defending both open
admissions and open admissions students. Citing national studies, Lavin believed in 1971 that
the large drop-out rates were caused by negative self-image among underprepared students who
doubted their ability “to meet the requirements of college work,” and became “demoralized by
any initial difficulties” (Drop-out, 1971, November 29). But Ballard complained to Healy and
Lavin (1972, August 21), and then to Kibbee, Healy and CUNY administrators that Lavin
jumped to false conclusions in a 1972 report and misread retention, credits earned, and grade
data to wrongly attack remediation programs: “anybody… could only conclude from Lavin’s
data that remediation is useless and therefore not worthy of financial support.” Ballard warned
that if Lavin’s report were publically released, the “consequences for open admissions could be
disastrous” (1973, January 10, p. 4).

Berger had warned since 1966 that students who had struggled in high school could
succeed in colleges if those colleges accepted mutual responsibility for academic failure. But
many of the supports within SEEK that disrupted patterns of failure in high school, such as
emotional counseling, stipends, and free books, were not available to non-SEEK students because CUNY did not fund them. Ballard told a state legislative committee that the greatest problems of Open Admissions were space and money: “Already… class size in remedial sections has been increased by almost fifty percent…. Due to insufficient funding, dedicated and experienced teachers of underprepared students are literally being driven to the point of utter physical and mental exhaustion. We must have additional funds if this effort is to succeed” (1971, November 17, p. 4). Kibbee also cited “money and space” as the two key problems. CUNY’s expansion was deeply underfunded: just when the system needed to expand student services, it had been forced to reduce them (Drop-out, 1971, November 29).

As CUNY Deans, both Berger and Ballard fought to protect at-risk students. In the Spring of 1971, they together visited every senior college for two days to gauge the effectiveness of its academic programs (Ballard, 1971, November 17, p. 2). Ballard developed a set of seven “Guidelines for Open Admissions” that called for: 1) orientation programs for all new students that included information about placement and compensatory courses, 2) placement exams in reading, writing and math and scheduling of adequate courses to meet those placements, 3) faculty review of first-year student programs to ensure readiness for all courses, 4) creating new courses in “developmental reading and study skills, basic written English, and developmental mathematics” capped at fifteen students and with credit for any college-level work, 5) placement of students into appropriate first-year courses, including “stretched out sequences of introductory courses,” 6) assigning a full-time counselor for each 50-75 students with two or more developmental courses, and 7) special grading systems for compensatory courses and strict attendance requirements—but no academic expulsions during a student’s first year (1971, March 11). Based on Ballard and Berger’s reports of their campus visits, Healy “ordered a general
tightening of procedures for counseling, placement in appropriate courses, registration and further development of remedial courses” (Ballard, 1971, November 17, p. 3).

Berger and Ballard also organized annual open admissions conferences beginning in March of 1971 (Proceedings, 1971, March). Berger organized and launched a “CUNY BA Program” that awarded up to 30 college credits for “non-classroom experience” (Berger, 1971, October 20; The CUNY BA, n.d.). Berger proposed a new CUNY “Center for Compensatory Education” that would collect, evaluate and develop compensatory education materials, develop placement tests and disseminate information throughout the university (Berger, 1972, pp. 3-4). Ballard proposed and organized a “national conference to develop strategies to sustain until graduation black male students enrolled in white universities” (Ballard, 1972, July 24).

Shaughnessy Receives a Competing Offer and Demands A Promotion (1973)

In January of 1973, Shaughnessy told Gross (now a City College associate dean) that Hunter College was offering to hire her with an early promotion to associate professor and a substantial raise to be their Director of Basic Writing. If City College did not match the offer, she would leave (Gross, 1973, January 16, p. 1; Maher, 1997, p. 140).

Among the top four senior colleges, Hunter had the least experience with SEEK: City began SEEK in 1965; Brooklyn and Queens started SEEK programs in 1966; Hunter did not accept full-time SEEK students until the Fall of 1968 (Berger, 1969, October 21, pp. 55, 104). At the onset of open admissions, to avoid stigmatizing students, Hunter briefly mainstreamed them (Decker, Jody & Brings, 1976, p. 53; Gray & Slaughter, 1980, p. 88). In 1971-72 Hunter tried a single-semester, five-hour, three-credit compensatory course and writing lab with modified grading procedures and increased tutoring and counseling services, followed by its existing mainstream English 120 composition course. This “pre-freshman composition course was…
taught by interested and talented staff… mostly poets, writers and playwrights.” (Gray & Slaughter, 1980, p. 88; Ballard, 1972, June 23). Hunter began placement testing in the Fall of 1971 (Decker et. al., 1976, p. 54). In 1972-1973, after a Hunter task force visited other CUNY campuses, it adopted a three-semester Basic Writing sequence much like Shaughnessy’s model (Basic Writing Workshop I, Basic Writing Workshop II, and English 120) (Gray & Slaughter, 1980, p. 88; Decker et. al., 1976, pp. 94-95; Ballard, 1972, June 23). Now Hunter was trying to steal Shaughnessy.

Gross wrote at once to City College Provost Saul Touster and President Marshak urging them to match Hunter’s offer. He reminded them that they had all depended on Shaughnessy during the “1968-1969 riots” and afterward: “She has been at the center of the most vexing problems we have all had to confront and has emerged as a leader…” (1973, January 16, p. 1). Gross praised Shaughnessy’s growing influence and reputation within CUNY, “throughout the country,” and within “the whole field of language skills” (p. 2). He praised her book project as likely to be of “considerable significance” in a critical area of education (p. 2) He agreed with the new English Chair David Buckley’s view that Shaughnessy was “the one person in an English Department of 148 members who is indispensible” (p. 3).

Remarkably, while City College scrambled to retain Shaughnessy, she formally applied to extend her leave for an additional year—until September of 1974. Buckley approved her request, finding “no one more deserving” than Shaughnessy, lauding her “important work” and hoping that she would decide against the extended sabbatical because “she is so important to the department that, frankly, I do not know what we would do without her” (Buckley, 1973, March 12). Despite facing new budget cuts, City College promoted Shaughnessy to associate professor
and gave her a double salary increase, fending off Hunter’s rival offer (Review Committee Minutes 28 Mar 73; Maher, 1997, pp. 140-143).

This promotion was significant: In the City College 1970-1971 Bulletin, the English Department listed 19 full professors, 18 associate professors, 32 assistant professors and 72 lecturers. (p. 77-81). In just three years, Shaughnessy leaped from the department’s lowest full-time rank (lecturer) to its second highest (associate professor) as well as an Assistant Chair of the English Department. Although Shaughnessy had used “Director” titles since 1967, she would now be formally recognized as the “Director of the Writing Program” in charge of writing courses, including ESL and SEEK as well as the writing center. She would “inform and consult” with the SEEK Director, report to the English chair on “on all matters requiring departmental action or coordination” but also reporting directly to three City College deans (Shaughnessy, 1973 April 18).

Meanwhile, on May 23, 1973—six months after Shaughnessy validated the City College proficiency test, four months after Hunter tried to hire her, and one month after she accepted City College’s matching offer—Hunter adopted its first writing proficiency test. The new Hunter Exam initially targeted transfer students (Decker et. al., 1976, p. 58).

**The Supreme Court Legalizes de facto School Segregation (1973)**

Meanwhile, the country was growing more conservative. In 1972, Nixon and Agnew were reelected in a 49 state landslide with over 60% of the popular vote. In 1973, in *Keyes v. School District No 1, Denver, Colorado*, the Supreme Court finally addressed the legality of *de facto* segregated school systems. Five justices of a divided Court found proof of “a systematic
program of segregation [in] a substantial portion” of Denver’s school system. But the Court required proof of deliberate “segregative intent” to find that any northern de facto segregated public school system violated the constitution. Few northern school boards would profess to racism even as school segregation worsened; the divided Court effectively legalized racial segregation in all public school systems outside the south.

Justices Powell and Douglas would have eliminated any distinction between de jure and de facto school segregation, imposing an affirmative duty nationwide to integrate schools. Douglas called de facto segregation a “misnomer” as it merely represented “only more subtle types of state action” where governments forced, aided or abetted the creation of segregated neighborhoods and then in “a travesty of justice” treated the segregated neighborhoods as a “sacrosanct” basis for creating segregated schools (pp. 216-17). Powell concluded:

I can discern no basis in law or logic for holding that the motivation of school board action is irrelevant in Virginia and controlling in Colorado….The net result …is the application of an effect test to the actions of southern school districts and an intent test to those in other sections….Rather…we should hold forthrightly that any significant segregated school conditions in any section of the country are a prima facie violation of constitutional rights (pp. 231-232).

Relying on Kenneth and Mamie Clark’s research that demonstrated the harm of American racism, the 1954 Brown decision launched two decades of clear-eyed reform that recognized that the harm of racism within American public education violated students’ constitutional rights. But

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under Nixon’s more conservative Court, America’s longstanding and convenient myopia about structural racism within public education now resumed.

The Proficiency Exam Reshapes Writing Instruction at City College (1973-1974)

After Shaughnessy endorsed the Proficiency Exam in November of 1972, her successor did not question it. In 1973, Skurnik issued a new Basic Writing Program report in which she flatly validated the Exam. “The Proficiency Examination measures the overall effectiveness of placement procedures and course work within the sequence.” (1973, p. 4). Skurnik wrote to associate professor Allan Danzig that “given its relationship to Basic Writing, the Proficiency Examination report, whatever it contains, means a great deal to us…” (1973, January 29, p. 2).

Skurnik immediately aligned the Basic Writing courses more closely with the Exam. Her February 1973 Guidelines called for students to take a fifty-minute timed essay test each month (four in all) in all Basic Writing One and Two courses. The final timed essay also served as a departmental final exam, and students were now required to pass the exam in order to pass the course (Skurnick, 1973, February 28). (As such, Basic Writing One and Basic Writing Two students had to pass essentially the same timed-final exam twice.) Moreover, Skurnick began an “exchange” requiring teachers to grade student finals in other sections, raising the stakes further (Skurnick, 1973, p. 4).

Skurnick did not require in-class essay tests in Basic Writing Three, but she advised that it was “wise to continue the practice of assigning in-class essays. The requirement of the proficiency examination further recommends this kind of assignment” (1973, February 28). Assistant professor Betty Rizzo took over in early 1973 as the Basic Writing Three coordinator and she wrote to teachers that the “[in-class] essay should be explained and practiced several times during the term. Although perhaps the proficiency test should not be explicitly practiced
for, the [Basic Writing Three] instructor should be familiar with its requirements” (Rizzo, 1973, February 7).

The SEEK students continued to struggle within this new basic writing course model, with “the percentage of SEEK students failing Basic Writing courses… somewhat higher” than other students over several semesters “preceding” Spring 1973 (Skurnick, 1973, p. 4). In addition, SEEK students were far more likely to be placed into the Basic Writing One grammar class. In Fall 1972, Skurnick placed 47% (161/338) of SEEK students and only 24% (430/1782) of other students into Basic Writing One. One semester later, there were 271 students in all Basic Writing One sections including 153 new students and about 118 repeaters. But 61% (164/271) were SEEK students (Skurnick, 1973, p. 1). The combination of high Basic Writing One placements, high course failure rates, and the additional proficiency exam gateway were increasingly targeting SEEK students.

Skurnick’s new course descriptions also suggested the effects of the proficiency exam: she described all three writing courses by cataloguing the common errors and deficiencies of students placed into them. Skurnick described Basic Writing One: “The writing of the student…typically reveals a large number of grammatical errors of several different kinds. The areas of difficulty [include] agreement, punctuation, capitalization, verb forms and spelling. The course teaches the student what the sentence is and how to control it.” (1973, p. 5). She described Basic Writing Two: “Problems associated with sentence pattern variety, overall organization, and content are the substance of [the course]….error is still a problem….“ (p. 5). Shaughnessy’s 1971 Report had described Basic Writing Three as:

Academic Forms… For students who can write a personal essay but need practice with forms that are more prescriptive (essay question, the term paper, book review, etc.)…The
course attempts to give students a clear sense of how to go about preparing special papers such as book reviews or term papers, using traditional methods of quoting and citing sources, and how to answer, under exam conditions, the kinds of questions they are likely to get in their courses. (1971, Fall, pp. 4-5).

By comparison, Skurnick’s 1973 Report described the same course in this way:

Intermittent error and weak presentation and development characterize the writing of the [Basic Writing Three] student. It is felt that the student at this level needs to master the techniques of writing the in-class essay and the term paper, and the course centers around these techniques” (Skurnik, 1973, p. 6).

Although Shaughnessy essentially conceded that her Basic Writing One and Two courses were basic skills rather than writing courses, she intended Basic Writing Three to resuscitate City’s mainstream, college-level writing course. But by 1973, the goal of all three courses, including Basic Writing Three, was becoming refocused away from academic or other genres of writing toward the sentence correctness and timed 300-word, four or five paragraph essays of the Proficiency Exam. The entire program continued to shift more deeply into deficit pedagogy, focusing on diagnosing and eliminating expected weaknesses and errors.

**City College Teachers Teach To The Proficiency Exam (1973-74)**

By early 1974, lecturer Mary Lea Meyersohn reported to Shaughnessy that the Proficiency Exam taking and passing rates were plummeting among Basic Writing students.76 These low passing rates intensified pressures to align teaching with the exam or find new ways to game it. In a heated discussion, the writing teachers sought to prevent any Basic Writing Two students from taking the Exam. Many teachers wanted to require Basic Writing Three students to

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obtain a “permit slip” to sit for the exam. (Preventing some students from taking the Exam would have increased the already high avoidance rates but might have pushed up passing rates in the short term; clearly the teachers felt pressured to do that somehow.) Danzig, who administered the exam, disagreed with all efforts to further discourage students from taking it. Meyersohn asked Shaughnessy to come to their next meeting (Meyersohn, 1974, February).

| Table 8: City College Students Completing Basic Writing Three Who Then Took and Passed The Proficiency Exam June 1972 to January 1974 (From Meyersohn, February 1974) |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| (a) Percent of Successful Basic Writing Three Students Who Sat For the PE | 77%             | 71%             | 55%             |
| (b) Percent of BW3 PE Takers Who Passed the Exam | 83%             | 63%             | 50%             |
| Percent of All Successful Basic Three Students Who Passed the PE ((a) x (b)) | 63.9%           | 44.7%           | 27.5%           |
| Percent of Successful Basic Writing Three Student Who Either Did Not Take The PE or Failed It | 31.1%           | 55.3%           | 72.5%           |

Table Eight summarizes and restates Meyersohn’s report of Exam passing and avoidance rates. By her count, more Basic Writing Three students attempted the Exam in May 1972 than had done so in January 1972, such that only 31% had not passed it. But new problems emerged in June of 1973 when 55% of the Basic Writing Three students either failed the Exam or did not take it. Then the situation worsened in January 1974 when 72% did not pass it.

Meyersohn also broke out the passing rates by student grades in Basic Writing Three; her calculations are set out in Table Nine. They reveal a clear trend across two years: the Basic Writing course grades quickly became closely aligned with the Proficiency Exam. In Spring 1972, students with A’s in the course who took the test were very likely (96%) to pass it; but students with D’s in Basic Writing Three who took the test had a pretty good chance (64%) too. (Of course, this was the test sitting where Chandler softened the grading.) The Spring 1973 Basic Writing Three grades more closely aligned with the exam. Now the D student had only a 39%
chance of passing the Exam. But the Fall 1973 Basic Writing Three grades even more closely paralleled the Exam. In that semester, the D student had only a 29% chance of passing the Proficiency Exam. Within a year after Shaughnessy validated the Proficiency Exam, Basic Writing Three teachers aligned their course grades with the Exam criteria.

Table 9: City College Basic Writing Three Students Who Took and Passed The Proficiency Exam June 1972 to January 1974, By Course Grades (From Meyersohn, February 1974)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic Writing Three Students Who Took And Passed the PE</th>
<th>June 1972 PE</th>
<th>June 1973 PE</th>
<th>January 1974 PE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>With A grades in Basic Writing Three</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With B grades in Basic Writing Three</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With C grades in Basic Writing Three</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With D grades in Basic Writing Three</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adrienne Rich’s Final Basic Writing Class (Fall 1974)

After a two-year absence, Rich returned and taught one section of Basic Writing One in the fall of 1974. Her archives include her syllabus, some assignment sheets and a closing memo. There were 13 students. Rich dropped two for excessive absences and passed the other eleven. (1975, January). Rich continued to resist the tiered course model, but she focused much more on sentence mechanics. Her syllabus began: “This is the first half of a two-semester course whose purpose is to give you as many opportunities as possible to write, receive criticism, and revise your writing. We will work toward a place where you can criticize and proofread your own work and become your own editor” (Rich, 1974, September). The readings were reduced to only two collections of short fiction, Tytell & Jaffe’s 1970 anthology Affinities, and Tillie Olsen’s 1962 Tell me a Riddle. The class was linked with an Anthropology One class. Writing would include at-home journals, weekly (“or oftener”) in-class writing and ten at-home papers, with a focus on working through three drafts. There would be frequent conferences. By the second semester,
“students should be working together in teams, criticizing each others’ work and helping each other rewrite” (Rich, 1974, September).

The nine surviving writing prompts include some similar to Rich’s earlier classes. A two-page handout on dialogue suggests she assigned another dialogue essay. But at least several writing assignments were in-class essays closely modeled on the Proficiency Exam format. A January 2 “In-Class Essay” asked students to attack or defend a short quote about adult children living at home (Rich, 1975, January 2). A “50-minute essay” in October asked students to write a 200 word essay about a time they “felt fear,” including an introductory and concluding sentence (Rich, 1974, October). In a copy editing assignment, Rich assembled four response essays to her “October exam.” (The responses suggest the exam asked students to choose an adage from a list and defend or attack it. Two chose “the clothes make the man.”) Rich’s assignment was for all students to proofread all four essays “for mechanical errors, especially verb endings and sentence structure” and to correct them (Rich, 1974 November, p. 1).

In addition, Rich’s course materials now included seventeen pages of direct grammar exercises, including punctuation review, fill in the blank vocabulary, verbs forms, active and passive verbs, verb modals, subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, sentences and fragments, and dependent and independent clauses (Rich, 1974, Fall). Two similar but undated worksheets in another Rich archive folder suggest she may have used them occasionally before 1974; but they are otherwise absent in her earlier teaching materials. In 1974, they became a substantial focus of her writing course.

Although Rich had been rehired as a tenured full professor, after one semester, she resigned. Rich wrote a memo reporting on her eleven remaining students, using the old SEEK mid-term report form. Rich’s comments focused more on mechanics than she had in the Fall of
1970. She believed four students needed ESL tutors; she had tried to refer two students during
the semester. One had had a bad experience with his tutor; the other said the Writing Center lost
his card and never gave him a tutor (pp. 1-2). Rich’s strongest student insisted on writing “empty
‘correct’ sentences.” Four had verb problems; another had “severe spelling problems.” Rich’s
frustration was evident; she found the class “very young, giddy and eager to ‘get by’ on the
whole.” Had she assigned grades rather than passes, she wrote that five of the eleven would have
gotten Ds (1975, January, pp. 1-2). Rich told Chairman Ed Quinn she “would not consider
teaching full-time ever again (Rich, 1975, March 2).

**Shaughnessy Seeks a Deanship (1974)**

In early 1974, Shaughnessy sought appointment to a new dean’s post at City College,
created to oversee all basic education programs. She didn’t get the job, in part because she lacked
a Ph.D. Shaughnessy and her allies were shocked and angry; they considered the rejection to be a
“grave insult” (Maher, 1997, pp. 148-152). Undaunted, Shaughnessy soon found an even better
deanship. In December 1973, Shaughnessy was asked to join a new Chancellor’s Task Force to
develop a central Instructional Resource Center (Healy, 1973, December 10; Kibbee, 1974,
January 28). In January of 1974, Chancellor Kibbee asked this Task Force to advise him on a
new University-wide Center to gather, evaluate and develop instructional materials, develop new
in-service training, and special MA programs. This had been Berger’s idea and Kibbee appointed
Berger as the Task Force Chair (Kibbee, 1974, January 28). In early March, the Task Force sent
Kibbee a proposal urging that the Director of the Center would also “develop placement tests for
compensatory instruction” (CUNY, 1974, March 8, p. 1). In further alignment with
Shaughnessy’s resume, the Task Force proposed that Director candidates would be required to
have “substantial experience in compensatory education and administrative ability (p. 2).
Although she was on the selection committee, Shaughnessy applied for the new Director/Dean’s position (Berger, 1974, October 7).

Ballard takes credit for getting Shaughnessy this Deanship, saying he persuaded Healy to bring Shaughnessy into CUNY central (Ballard, 2011 p. 232). Berger also later admitted that he had had Shaughnessy in mind all along (Maher, 1997, p. 153). The Task Force took pains to appear neutral: they advertised the position, considered 92 applicants and interviewed five finalists. Then they recommended Shaughnessy (Berger, 1974, October 7). Kibbee quickly agreed (Kibbee, 1974, October 15). On November 1, 1974, the Trustees of the Board of Higher Education approved the creation of a new Instructional Resource Center which would aid “compensatory instruction” throughout CUNY by collecting and sharing curricular resource materials, developing new ones, collecting a library, disseminating information including a newsletter, holding seminars, and “developing placement tests for compensatory education” (Board, 1974, November 25, pp. 124-25).

After Shaughnessy used the Hunter job offer to extract an early promotion, a more powerful job, and a double raise from City College—she never returned to work there. Thirty-three months after she began her sabbatical leave of absence, Shaughnessy began her new job as an associate dean of City University. She had helped to write her own job description to include authority for developing new university wide placement tests. Shaughnessy now was the University administrator responsible for developing reading, math and writing tests across CUNY.
Chapter Fourteen

Writing Instruction Across CUNY And Shaughnessy’s Circle (1970-74)

Beginning on the first day of open admissions—even as they faced extraordinary pressures to teach grammar and fast, shallow, correct writing—many writing teachers across CUNY implemented powerful, complex new ways to teach writing: Robert Lyons brought his rhetorical pedagogy from Rutgers to Queens College; Audre Lorde introduced a “remedial writing through creative writing” course at John Jay College; Kenneth Bruffee launched his rhetorical, test-free, and student-centered pedagogy at Brooklyn College; and Teresa O’Connor led the development of a critical pedagogy writing program at the Community College of Staten Island (Lyons, 1973, March 30; McQuade 2016, May 26, p. 4; Hall, 2004, p. 60; Bruffee, 1970, June; 1972a; Shor, 1974).

Even within two and four-year CUNY colleges that began with basic skills pedagogies, many writing teachers soon realized their ineffectiveness and began to experiment with new ideas and approaches. “[V]ery quickly we became unsatisfied…. [Students] weren’t learning… they weren’t becoming better writers. And so we tried lots and lots of things” (Brereton, 2015, November 11, pp. 5-7). Four examples from the classrooms of CUNY faculty (Bruffee, Lyons, Brereton and Perl) may illustrate some of the new writing pedagogies that began to appear across the system.


In May of 1970, Kenneth Bruffee, a quiet, deeply serious, tenured associate professor who studied 20th Century American novels, took over as the administrator for Brooklyn College’s mainstream (and only) first-year writing course, English 1.2. He had written a draft textbook and he sent copies to Brooklyn’s writing teachers (Bruffee, 1970, Summer). With more
field testing, feedback and revisions through 1970-1971, Bruffee published his *A Short Course in Writing* in 1972.

From the Fall of 1970 until as late as mid-1975, Bruffee ran a writing program with no exit or proficiency tests that mainstreamed every single incoming student. Borrowing from the 1965 SEEK model, students with low placement test scores were placed into smaller, “stretched” compensatory sections of the mainstream course that were capped at fifteen students and met for five hours each week (Brooklyn, 1970, March 11, p. 1; Bruffee, 1970, September, p. 1). Students could also receive tutoring or counseling. The Department replaced “F”s with do-over “No Credit” grades, but required that students pass the course within three semesters or face expulsion (Brooklyn, 1970, November 17). There was no final exam; final grades were determined by teachers based on ten different essay grades, most of which were written outside of class—essentially a portfolio system (Brooklyn, 1970, June). In the years that Bruffee administered this program, Brooklyn also had no writing certification exam; instead Bruffee’s writing course grade was accepted by the College as the best evidence of student competency in writing.

In June 1970, Bruffee published a set of Q and As about his new program. The last question was “What importance do mechanics, usage and grammar have?” He answered: “They are matters of etiquette. In higher education, etiquette is subordinate to ideas. The right time to teach writing etiquette is towards the end of a writing course, not at the beginning. First things first” (Bruffee, 1970, June). The English Department set out its course description, including Bruffee’s course teaching goals: “Every student who passes English 1.2 should be able to (1) express an idea of his own precisely, and (2) support his idea, clearly relating the parts of his explanation to each other and to the main idea. The best students should also be able to (3) show
the significance of an idea by relating it to a context of issues” (Brooklyn, 1970, June). In refusing to center grammar in his program, Bruffee argued that people learn to write through “a process of mental growth. They learn the most important thing first: the courage to express an idea of their own simply and precisely, and to support and explain that idea. Then they learn to place the idea into context to show its significance” (Bruffee, 1970, June). When Bruffee developed his collaborative, peer-tutor writing center, he hired Janet Mayes to help him, incorporating the ideas she had developed for a collaborative SEEK Writing Center at City College (Mayes, 2016, June 29, p. 5).

A Short Course in Writing grew from Bruffee’s own teaching, especially his decision some years earlier “to give my students complete freedom of subject matter and opinion” (Bruffee, 1972a, p. 276) and incorporated his growing interest in collaborative, student-centered pedagogy (p. 277). He argued a writing teacher should not be an autocrat or critic, but “first, scene director, second, advocate and resource, and third, evaluator and guide” (p. 5). When students despaired or faced harsh criticism, Bruffee urged that writing teachers should “defend the best aspects of the work” and act as “the advocate of inexperienced writers, not their prosecutor” (p. 6).

Bruffee’s textbook had four main parts, each containing a number of writing exercises. The writing exercises build on each other in a kind of rhetorical scaffolding. They are recursive, calling on students to revisit and rewrite earlier pieces. In Part One, “Invention,” Bruffee told students “that a writer creates ideas out of his private experience, his perceptions, and the process of association which goes on continually in his mind. The first thing for you to do in learning to write is to learn to create ideas in this way” (10). The first assignment asked students to write “a true story of something that happened to you once, which deeply moved you, frightened you,
disgusted you, or made you angry.” Offensive words were OK as needed, and Bruffee advised not to “worry about spelling, punctuation, correct usage, or grammar. Don’t worry about being correct in any way” (p. 11). Students brainstormed with listing and clustering exercises, generated ideas through metaphor, and wrote their own propositions/thesis statements—a necessary skill as they chose all their remaining topics (pp. 12-23).

In Part Two, “Defending A Proposition,” students wrote direct argument assignments that supported and explored their own propositions using different rhetorical moves and specified formats. Students wrote “says/does” rhetorical outlines after their first draft as an “aid to rewriting” and which pressed them to think about their purposes and effects on audiences (p. 49). Part III focused on conclusions. Part IV analyzed analysis and synthesis within research. Bruffee included a few notes on style but no grammar exercises. He included readings: nine student essays followed by 18 essays by “experienced writers’, all with author credit and permission (1972a).

In his later years, Bruffee grew less radical and more accommodationist (Bruffee, 1983; 1988; 1999; Lu, 1992). But in 1973, Bruffee advocated totally changing the social organization of education in order to adopt principles of collaborative learning (1973, p. 643). He argued that collaborative learning required a fundamental cultural shift among educators too used to centering themselves in a social relationship that “accentuates the [teacher’s] strength and the student’s weakness” (1973, p. 642).

Bruffee’s program was almost undermined before it began. In March of 1970, an English Department faculty committee proposed a new high-stakes departmental exam for all English 1.2 courses. But the Chair did not consider their proposal; two months later, they withdrew it and Bruffee’s course which had no final writing tests stood its ground (Brooklyn, 1970, May 20).
Bruffee’s program was challenged again in December 1972, when a Brooklyn “Planning Council” of Deans and Provosts asked faculty to develop college-wide “competency standards in English composition, mathematics and foreign language” (Solkema, 1973, May 29). The Committee consulted with the English Chair and “considered alternatives.” But in June, the committee accepted that a grade of “C” in Bruffee’s 1.2 course certified “that a student can write at college level.”

**Ballard and Berger Criticize Brooklyn’s Mainstreaming Model (1970-1973)**

Although Ballard and Berger knew nothing about writing pedagogy, in 1970 they became the CUNY Deans responsible for evaluating compensatory/remedial/basic writing programs across the system. Ballard was influenced from 1965 to 1967 by Bambara and Christian’s original SEEK writing pedagogies; but by 1970, he was more influenced by Shaughnessy’s tiered approach. Bruffee’s Brooklyn program mainstreamed students using a compensatory course model very similar to the 1965 SEEK model. As in SEEK’s first years, there were no departmental exit exams or college-wide proficiency exams. Bruffee’s pedagogy was student-centered and collaborative.

But Ballard saw little hope for Brooklyn’s model: “One can only hope that the lack of strenuous effort to create innovative ways of dealing with the problems of open admissions will leave the faculty and administrators of this college well-rested for the confusion which is bound to come in the fall (Ballard, 1970, April, p. 5). In 1972, Berger found “serious difficulties” with Brooklyn’s structures, including Bruffee’s mainstreaming writing program. “Instead of English

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77 (Brooklyn, 1973, June 26). The Committee exacted some concessions. Students with an NC grades would have to take a non-credit writing workshop course either with or before attempting 1.2 a second time. An English department committee would supervise instructional teams of writing teachers and would review the work of students receiving NC grades for possible “individualized courses of study” (Brooklyn, 1973, June 26).
courses at different levels, [Brooklyn] offers a compensatory course which meets for more hours and in smaller classes” (Berger, 1972, February 29, p. 1). In 1973, Berger suggested that the Chancellor meet with Brooklyn’s president Kneller because Brooklyn College was “grossly inadequate in meeting the educational needs of the underskilled student” (Berger, 1973, June 12).

Ballard and Berger, without an understanding of writing pedagogy, lapsed into top-down structural assessments, using Shaughnessy’s program as their gold standard. They were now promulgating her tiered course model and basic skills pedagogy across CUNY.

However, Ballard and Berger misjudged Brooklyn, at least as to Fall 1970 students: its four-year graduation rate for the fall 1970 class was twice as high as City’s graduation rate (28% vs. 14.3%) and well above the average graduation rate for all senior colleges (21.4%). Brooklyn’s four-year graduation plus retention rate was also higher than both City’s rate (70.1% vs. 65.2%) and the senior college average rate (56.8%). Brooklyn also did well with students with high school GPA’s between 70 and 80, although its retention was low for those with GPAs below 70 (Kaufman & Botwinick, 1975, June; Table Six above). The role of Bruffee’s program in this success would require more study. But Bruffee’s pedagogy was undoubtedly more rhetorical and student-centered than Shaughnessy’s sentence/paragraph/essay tiered model. Bruffee (like Bambara and Christian) deemphasized grammar and encouraged students to ask and answer their own questions, often (like Mayes) working in collaboration with their peers.

But Ballard and Berger were not equipped to evaluate these different writing pedagogies. In another example, Berger offered critical reviews of O’Connor’s critical pedagogy program at Staten Island Community College (Berger, 1972, February 29; 1973, June 12; 1974, July 18). O’Connor’s program operated on a democratic basis with no formal placement tests or mandatory placements into tiered courses. Berger recommended fixed, formal placement tests,
mandatory tiered courses, and writing course exit evaluations—all closely aligned with Shaughnessy’s changes to City College’s writing program (Berger, 1974, July 18, pp. 1-2). But, unwilling to accept these recommendations, the Staten Island teachers fought back. They published a fifty-one page, polyvocal description of their entire program in *College English*, guest-edited and co-written by Ira Shor (Shor, 1974). They also obtained separate assessments of their writing program from nationally known writing teachers James Moffett and Peter Elbow.

Berger was perplexed by the Moffett and Elbow’s “very positive” assessments. They praised the program’s teachers and its “humanistic philosophy.” Elbow wrote: “I agree that you shouldn’t drag [students] in by making the course compulsory to people with certain grades. Probably the strongest piece of ammunition you use is that all of your students are there by choice…. Again I agree that massive amounts of testing is not the answer” (Berger, 1974, July 18, p. 2).

**Lyons rejects grammar instruction and five-paragraph essays at Queens (1970-1975)**

Robert Lyons came to Queens College in 1970 (Lyons, 1973, March 30). He brought with him a rhetorical pedagogy he had developed with Thomas Van Laan at Rutgers. They published *Language and the Newsstand: A Critical Reader* in 1968, a combined thematic reader and course textbook. In eight units, Van Laan and Lyons first raised rhetorical issues in a short introduction, then grouped a series of non-fiction readings drawn from the popular press to explore those issues, then raised questions about the readings, and finally offered suggested writing prompts.

Their first section asked students to analyze the rhetoric, including the visual rhetoric, in groups of print advertisements: “unlike the other texts in this book, the ads do not rely on words alone to define the four elements of the verbal situation—speaker, subject, purpose and audience.
You must also study the pictures, the size and texture of the type, and the format of the page” (Van Laan & Lyons, 1968, p. 18). At the end of the section, questions asked students to analyze intended audiences, evaluate their uses of evidence, and critique their assumptions and implied arguments: “What impression of femininity does this ad create?...What sort of masculinity does this ad emphasize? Why?” (pp. 60-61). The first writing prompt focused on a Charles Atlas bodybuilder ad with two voices: “In an essay of one to two pages, show how the speaker in the biography modifies the impression of Atlas given by the speaker in the main text” (pp. 63-64).

Van Laan and Lyons’ second section examined how political speeches simultaneously addressed multiple audiences and adopted differing voices in different circumstances (pp. 67-68). The next two sections examined differing accounts of the murder of a Queens woman and a Los Angeles race riot to explore how writers using the same subject adopted different voices and crafted different implied arguments for different purposes (pp. 93-94, 125-128). The fifth section focused on rhetorical uses of specialized terminology and metaphor in articles about the firing of the New York Yankees’ manager (p. 167-68). (The first writing prompt in that section asked students to analyze two writers’ different uses of ridicule (p. 195).) The next section closely examined the effects of different vocabularies adopted by writers eulogizing Marilyn Monroe (p. 199-200). The final section examined how writers use concrete language to more powerfully discuss abstract subjects (pp. 241-242).

In about 1972, Donald McQuade was a new Rutgers Ph.D. graduate when Lyons hired him to teach writing at Queens. McQuade recalls that they were guided by the pedagogical principle that “you start where students are able.” This pedagogy required teachers to know who their students were, where they came from, and what their backgrounds were with reading and writing (McQuade, 2016, May 26, p. 6). Writing teachers started
with how [students] were trying to articulate themselves in relation to whatever was around them and that’s a process of inquiry.

So the notion of a five-paragraph theme, five-paragraph essay seemed to us…. off the wall, because that means if you’re writing for a structure that’s been created for someone else, you’re not learning to internalize structure. And if you internalize the structure, you will find your way through writing and rewriting….

One of the teachable skills is rewriting; another is rereading. Grammar is not a skill; it’s information; it’s social convention. And what we did was to say to students you will learn grammar along the way because you’re becoming successful in articulating yourself as opposed to learning grammar first and then moving into trying to articulate yourself.

(McQuade, 2016, May 26, p. 7).

In 1971 and 1972 Queens used only a single semester compensatory writing course, “0.1 Basic Writing Skills, a three hour class which received three college credits (Ballard, 1972, June 23). McQuade further explains why the 1970s Queens writing program deemphasized grammar:

So if you reach for fluency before correctness, you will be more interested in writing. But if instructors impose limitations and if they funnel writers into particular structures… for the convenience of instructors, for institutional conveniences, they will not see that high of a percentage of those [students] continuing to write—because in those cases [students] are writing to fulfill the expectations of others rather than being driven by their deep human impulse to want to articulate themselves (McQuade, 2016, May 26, p. 7).

**Brereton Sees Tension Between Fluency and Errors at Queensborough (1970-1974)**

In 1970, John Brereton was still working on his Dryden dissertation at Rutgers when he was hired to teach writing courses as one of thirteen new tenure-track instructors and assistant
professors in the “Department of Educational Basic Skills” at Queensborough Community College (Brereton, 2015, November 11, p. 3). Although the CUNY senior colleges struggled from 1965 to 1975 with expansion and desegregation, the community colleges assumed the greatest teaching challenges under open admissions because most senior college applicants were still selected based on their class rank or high school GPAs. Admission to the community colleges was truly open to all City high school graduates. And their growth was breathtaking. From zero students in 1954, CUNY’s community colleges in 1962 had 14,682 enrolled students. In Fall 1967, they had 37,786 students. In Fall 1970, they had 58,544 students. In Fall 1974, they had 80,825. (CUNY Enrollment, 1967, December, p. 2; 1970, December, p. 2; 1974, p. 1).

At Queensborough, Brereton recalls they “were overwhelmed by students” and taught in twenty temporary “classroom modules on the side of a hill” (Brereton, 2015, November 11, p. 3). Writing teachers were encouraged to use Troyka and Nudelman’s 1970 *Steps in Composition*. Brereton tried it for a couple of semesters. “It was not earth-shattering pedagogy by any means; it essentially had students writing five-paragraph essays and working on their punctuation and grammar. They really needed a jolt of standard written English…. What was happening at CUNY was that we knew these students would be kicked out if they didn’t succeed in our courses” (p. 4). Brereton later became a composition historian and now he sees those basic skills writing courses as part of a larger tradition in American colleges to use first year composition as gateway courses:

> My course was clearly a part of that…. [because] we were not in the English department, we were in the basic skills department. And… if we passed our students and then they couldn’t do the writing that they were supposed to in the English department, we would

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78 The 1962 total includes NYC Community College (City Tech) which did not join CUNY until 1964 (CUNY Enrollment, 1967, December, p. 2).
be in trouble as a department or as faculty members. So, we were tough graders and many of our students did not succeed in our courses. They could take them again, of course, but the dropout rate was rather high. And I’m sure people noticed that at the central headquarters… and they… were quite appalled at the number of students who started the college and did not succeed. And part of the reason they didn’t succeed was because they couldn’t write well.

So our job, as we saw it, was to get those students to write well as quickly as possible, not writing in a very sophisticated way, but we wanted them to produce a lot of writing and to produce a lot of Edited American English (pp. 4-5).

But Brereton soon realized that his focus on correctness was self-defeating. His students realized that every sentence they wrote could include mistakes, so they wrote as little as possible. “So… there was an inherent conflict between the grammatical side and the fluency side and I’m not sure we ever managed to bridge that. Students were no fools; they knew what…we were looking for. But… many of them decided, at least, not to say much. And part of our job was to get them to say a lot more” (p. 5).

Brereton started to read composition journals; he went to CUNY’s teacher conferences and composition conventions. He met Shaughnessy when she gave a talk about using filmstrips to teach edited, standard English. Soon after he finished his Dryden dissertation in 1973, Brereton decided to leave literature behind and devote his career to composition (pp. 8-9).

**Perl Finds a Sophisticated, Recursive Process at Hostos (1971-75)**

Sondra Perl was still an NYU masters’ student when she taught her first writing class at Hostos Community College in Fall 1971. When Perl completed her masters degree the following June, Hostos hired her as a full-time instructor (Perl, 2015, November 14, pp. 2-3). At first, Perl
did whatever she was told. She used Troyka and Nudelman’s *Steps In Composition*. She tried to teach topic sentences, paragraphs and the old modes of writing. But it all seemed “hit or miss.” No one seemed to know how to teach writing. “[Students] either wrote or didn’t write. I wasn’t sure the pedagogy itself was helping them; it wasn’t necessarily harming them. But we were trying to figure out, how do you teach students who come to college unable to write, who actually can’t write when they enter? And it was a big question…that we all struggled with (p. 3).

Perl admired Janet Emig’s 1971 study of twelfth grader’s writing processes and adapted it to study a group of Hostos students for her Ph.D. dissertation (Perl, 1979). Perl asked her students to talk about their writing as they composed and audiotaped them. In 1975, Perl studied her data and found that her students did have a sophisticated writing process and that it was recursive: they often went back in order to move forward (Perl, 2015, November 14, pp. 4-5). But Perl saw her students using two different kinds of processes. Sometimes they moved back and forth productively, examining their topic, ideas, images and the rhythms of lines they had written, or going even deeper into a quiet internal process where they found “the sense of meaning they [were] trying to develop.” Perl later called that internal exploration a “felt sense” (p. 5).

But I also saw another set of behaviors that I thought were counterproductive—that did not help the students move forward in composing. And that was they would go back and re-read and they would start editing at a surface level and they would do that to such a degree that they would get worn down.

So it began to be a kind of premature editing in my eyes that circumvented or sort of short-circuited the composing that they were doing…. [Students] go back to edit before…
they even know what they want to say, so they spend an awful lot of time trying to fix the language at the surface level and they don’t have a fully formed set of rules to rely on, so they get worn out by trying to fix something they don’t know how to fix and then they sort of short circuit. And I thought… that… the reason for this, was that they had taken in from their teachers a notion that writing has to be correct and they didn’t—couldn’t sustain letting it be messy or unsure of where they were going, while they were composing in order to find out where they wanted to go (p. 5).

In this way, Perl was able to demonstrate that many assumptions about her students were false: When people looked at the drafts of… the kinds of students I was teaching at Hostos and others were teaching at the other campuses of CUNY, they would look at these drafts and say, “These students do not know how to write. They don’t have a composing process. This writing is haphazard, it doesn’t make sense, it’s… full of errors…” And so the conclusion was these students not only don’t know how to write, they have no such thing as a composing process. And what I was able to show in my dissertation is that they absolutely do have they did have and they do have composing processes, and they’re rich and as full as ours in that there is a process they rely on in order to make sense of the work they are thinking about or writing about (p. 5).

Shaughnessy gathers a Circle of Writing Teachers and Program Administrators (1970-74)

In the fall of 1970, Bruffee, Shaughnessy and Lyons met each other. They began “a small group of CUNY teachers who meet once a month to discuss open admission issues and to probe what we are learning….” (Bruffee, 1973, March 5). They did not always agree; in fact, Bruffee noted: “Mina and I disagree, of course, on many things. Our debate is often heated” (Bruffee, 1973, March 5). But this “Shaughnessy Circle” quickly became a welcoming community,
sanctuary and professional network for the first generation of CUNY composition and rhetoric teachers, scholars and administrators who were often overwhelmed by impossible expectations and challenging work. “We began working together because we had all discovered that as open admissions writing teachers we had more in common with each other than with many of our colleagues on our own campuses. We also acknowledged to ourselves that what we were supposed to be doing we simply didn’t know how to do” (Bruffee, 1988, p. 5). Shaughnessy soon assumed the role as the circle’s leader (Perl, 2015, November 14, p. 8; McQuade, 2016, May 26, pp. 9-10).

The Shaughnessy circle evolved into the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors or CAWS, although non-administrators like Perl, Brereton, McQuade and Sterling soon joined it. (Brereton, 2015, November 11, p. 9; Sterling, 2015, March 28, pp. 7-8). They traveled to conventions together and Shaughnessy assigned everyone to attend different sessions and report back to the group (McQuade, 2016, May 26, p. 9). She encouraged the whole circle to read and discuss books, assigning discussion leaders (pp. 9-10). Shaughnessy was a kind of towering presence over all those conversations. There wasn’t a scripted agenda that I could ever remember, but we would just get together, and a subject would come up—mostly that she would bring up. And we were all members of a kind of intellectual orchestra. And she was the conductor, and of course she was also the first violinist, and she was the percussionist at the same time—she would start beating the drum. And you would say “OK, all right, where are we going? what are we going to do?” And she always had an intellectual agenda, and it was an agenda that was about inquiry, about “how can we make ourselves smarter about this? What can we learn? We have a profound public responsibility as educators to create the conditions where any person
who was interested in learning could learn.” And that required us to know more about who those students were, but it also required us to know more about what were the fields that were out there that could support this kind of inquiry (p. 10).

To these young, idealistic writing teachers, Shaughnessy was a mysterious, charismatic, and inspiring leader. Perl recalls that “nobody seemed to know a whole lot about her life. But… when she was at a meeting, you had her full attention and she was articulate, and held I think for all of us, a sort of a position of inspiration that if we could work with her we knew we were fighting the good fight” (Perl, 2015, November 15, p. 8).

A Writing Paradigm Shifts Across CUNY (1965-1977)

Across CUNY, many writing teachers and some writing administrators recognized the need for dramatic change away from the moribund, shallow, and ineffective basic skills pedagogy that City College had first embraced when it completely abandoned logic and rhetoric in 1920. In 1965, Bambara and Christian emphasized writing, fluency, student ideas and two-way learning over grammar instruction. In 1967, Mirsky brought a complex new “voice” model to City College. In 1968, Mayes began to develop a collaborative pedagogy based on the Iowa model. In 1970, Bruffee dismissed grammar as mere “etiquette,” relegated to the end of the writing process and mainstreamed Brooklyn students in a program without writing tests. In that same year, Lyons brought both rhetoric and visual rhetoric from Rutgers to Queens and O’Connor began a radical experiment in critical pedagogy in Staten Island. In 1973, Rich argued that students must be able to trust that their writing is being read by a collaborator “as opposed to a grading machine out to get me for mistakes in spelling and grammar” (p. 269). By the early 1970s, Brereton realized that teacher demands for correctness were preventing his students from learning to write. By 1975, Perl’s research demonstrated both the rich writing processes of
CUNY students and the ways that teacher obsessions with correctness “short-circuited” those processes. In a 1976 article, McQuade labeled a “Back to Basics” approach by some English teachers as defensive, elitist, and an abandonment of “the integrity of their professional commitments” (1976, November 1, p. 8). In 1977 a New York Times article featured Shaughnessy, Bruffee, and other CUNY writing teachers—and noted that all their approaches reflected the “solidly documented” rule that “it is virtually useless to teach the rules of grammar in isolation from writing” (Fiske, 1977, p. 51).
Chapter Fifteen

CUNY Administrators Dismantle Their Own University (1975 to 1976)

Robert J. Kibbee was born in 1921 in Staten Island. His father, Guy Kibbee, was a successful stage and film actor. But his parents separated when Kibbee was a small boy and he moved with his mother to Manhattan. He went to Xavier High School, graduated from Fordham in 1943, and then served in the Philippines in World War II. Returning from the war, he earned masters and doctoral degrees in “higher educational administration” and worked in a series of college administrator jobs, interrupted by three years as an educational advisor in Pakistan. The tall, rumpled, pipe smoker was a vice president at Carnegie-Mellon and was virtually unknown outside of Pennsylvania when he was the surprise choice to replace the departing Bowker as CUNY’s chancellor in July of 1971 (Farber, 1971, July 27; Maeroff, 1982, June 18).

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Timothy S. Healy was born in Manhattan in 1923. He went to Manhattan’s Jesuit-run Regis High School where he decided to become a Jesuit priest. After attending a Jesuit seminary in Woodstock, New York, Healy studied theology at Louvain University in Belgium and completed a year of post-graduate work in Valencia, Spain. A multilingual polymath, Healy also earned his doctorate at Oxford in the poetry of John Donne. In 1968, he tried (but failed) to start a private liberal arts college for poor residents in Brooklyn’s Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood. In 1969, Healy was the Executive Vice President of Fordham when Bowker hired him as a Vice Chancellor at CUNY. Described in 1976 at age 52 as an “ample man with graying hair who… thrives on academic intrigue,” Healy lived simply in a mid-town Jesuit residence and turned over his CUNY salary to his order (Maeroff, 1976, April 16; Prial, 1993, January 1).

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Shaughnessy Joins CUNY Central as an Associate Dean

CUNY Associate Dean Shaughnessy opened her new Instructional Resource Center on March 31, 1975 (Shaughnessy, 1976, April 5, p. 1). In April, Chancellor Kibbee appointed a thirteen member advisory committee to the Center, chaired by Volpe, who had been the president of Richmond College since December of 1973 (Kibbee, 1975, April 8; Volpe, 1975, July 14; Peterson, 1973, December 18). Shaughnessy reported to Berger while Ballard and Berger both reported to Vice Chancellor Healy. Healy reported to Deputy Chancellor Seymour Hyman; Hyman reported to Kibbee.

In CUNY’s complex hierarchy, Shaughnessy was only two steps below Kibbee’s inner circle (CUNY, 1975, October). But she faced two immediate political threats. First, Kibbee promised Harold Proshansky, the President of CUNY’s Graduate Center, that Shaughnessy would soon move to the Graduate Center and report to him—a big functional demotion (Kibbee, 1975, March 27). Proshansky advised Shaughnessy that her Center would soon “become part of the Graduate School” and he assigned her to join a committee there (Proshansky, 1975, March 7). For the next two years, Shaughnessy fended off Proshansky and fought to keep her Center within CUNY Central (Prohansky, 1977, April 5; Kibbee, 1977, April 28). Second, in the Spring of 1975, the City cut CUNY’s funding by $20 million (Peterson, 1975, June 8). Amid growing budget cuts, Shaughnessy could not get funding for her new Center. Volpe and Healy repeatedly interceded with Kibbee (Volpe, 1975, July 14; 1975, October 17; Healy, 1975, June 25). By December, Shaughnessy secured two foundation grants to keep her Center operating (Healy, 1975, December 19).
A Battle Begins Over Tuition at CUNY (1975)

In the summer of 1975, CUNY’s financial troubles deepened. Albany politicians had criticized CUNY’s free tuition since the early 1960s; most of their constituents paid tuition at SUNY or private colleges; those colleges also lobbied for an end to CUNY’s competitive advantage (Fiske, 1976, June 2; Hechinger, 1976, May 18). In late 1973, a new CUNY board structure included three Governor Rockefeller appointees who could press his view that CUNY should impose tuition (Peterson, 1973, December 18). In addition, by 1975, many “top City officials [were] privately critical of the five-year-old open admissions policy, which they [said had] diluted the value of a City University diploma.” In June, citing the City’s deep fiscal crisis, Mayor Abraham Beame proposed $60 million in CUNY funding cuts, including elimination of SEEK (Peterson, 1975, June 8). In the fall, the City actually slashed CUNY’s funding “in lieu of tuition” by $34 million, causing CUNY to lose $21 million in New York State matching funds and leaving it $130 million below its planned budget (Board, 1975, December 15, p. 159; 1976, April 5, p. 48).

Imposing tuition to match SUNY’s rates would have immediately filled the entire shortfall by adding $135 million in new revenue (Board, 1976, June 1, p. 81). But free tuition was sacred; City College had been founded as the “Free Academy” in 1847; CUNY administrators and trustees were prepared to defend their 129 year-old-tradition at all costs. During the Fall of 1975, they eliminated the equivalent of 3,688 full-time positions. They suspended or postponed all construction projects. They increased teaching loads by 15% and reduced or cut programs (Board, 1975, December 15, p. 159; 1976, April 5, p. 48). Layoffs were even announced at CUNY Central (Kibbee, 1975, October 8). By October 23, Berger’s position had been eliminated (Healy, 1975, October 23). But these cuts were not nearly enough. To cut
more deeply, CUNY decided to reduce its overall student body, which by the fall of 1975 had grown to 223,738 undergraduates and 27,374 graduate students (CUNY, 1976, p. 70). Kibbee quickly decided to sacrifice his least-valued students.

Kibbee’s “Delousing” Centers Proposal Provokes Ballard’s Anger (Fall 1975)

Ballard’s frustration and anger had been building for some time. He believed that many CUNY administrators and faculty had never supported open admissions. Even so, by 1974 it had begun to successfully integrate the white system, to show successes, to change the City, and to build a new black middle class (Ballard, 1976, April 24, pp. 3-4). But then Ballard saw a growing backlash based in a mix of “underlying fear” about the emerging success of black students, “latent racial feeling,” faculty and administrators’ self-interest, and beliefs that open admissions had “debased” CUNY. Ballard believed CUNY administrators were using the fiscal crisis as a pretext to dismantle open admissions and eliminate black students, faculty and administrators (pp. 4-6).

As a CUNY dean, Ballard contained his anger. But in October, Kibbee circulated among the deans his idea to shrink the student body by rerouting 3,000 students each year into skills centers based on reading test scores. Healy asked for comments. Ballard sent his angry, bitter response to Kibbee, Healy, and several other administrators. Ballard reminded them that such centers were the same idea “previously put forth by Vice President Agnew and various ‘concerned’ faculty groups” who had always opposed open admissions (Ballard, 1975, October 24, p. 1). Ballard accused his Central office colleagues of “commonly” referring to them as “‘delousing’ centers, a term that [evoked] images either of disheveled 19th century immigrants or World War II concentration camps” (p. 1). He scoffed that skills centers could possibly address

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79 I don’t have Kibbee’s original proposal; I am limited to the descriptions of it in Ballard and Shaughnessy’s responses.
the large majority of all CUNY incoming students who needed academic assistance. Instead, Ballard wrote that he knew which students would be sent to the centers: “they will be mostly black and Puerto Rican…. students who have had nothing but failing experiences, whose very home life will reinforce their negative feelings about education, who will have no peer group pressure and who will all be on campuses where they will be segregated academically from the ‘regular’ student body” (p. 1). Arguing that the only precedents for such an action were “bad ones,” Ballard saw an obvious and economical alternative—to intervene in the senior year of high school for all struggling students and help them to prepare for CUNY (p. 2).

Shaughnessy Proposes Vertical Integration and a New Testing Unit (October 27, 1975)

Berger’s layoff was a functional promotion for Shaughnessy, who now reported to Healy, only one step below Kibbee’s inner circle. Although laid off, Berger would remain in limbo at CUNY central for over two years, until he accepted an appointment at Queens College (Cohen 1978, September 26). Berger sent Healy a position paper in response to Kibbee’s idea that argued essentially for a version of the SEEK model without J grades. Students who showed “insufficient progress” after two semesters would “be dropped,” but based only on their teachers’ recommendations (Berger, 1975, October 27, pp. 1-3). Berger also recommended tighter registration rules to discourage students from dropping courses (p. 4).

On the same day, Shaughnessy sent Healy a seven-page memo with her proposal. She recognized the administrative convenience and political advantages of the Center idea, which “would ease the minds of those groups and individuals in the City who have steadily opposed open admissions as a threat to quality education” (Shaughnessy, 1975, October 27, p. 1). But she questioned its “educational value” because the centers would repeat in several ways the “alienating experience” these students had already suffered. They would be “marked in
institutionally indelible ways as being inferior students.” Skills would be isolated “from real academic contexts,” leading students to doubt their value, “particularly when they involve abcdarian tasks that more privileged students carried out when they were younger.” In the centers, teachers and students would be sealed off from the more challenging mainstream environment, which would lead first to diminished expectations and then shock and corrosive paranoia when unprepared students entered mainstream courses. In addition, mainstream teachers would suffer due to their isolation from these struggling students (p. 2). Shaughnessy suggested that better models integrated “skills training with subject matter,” citing several examples (pp. 2-3). Like Ballard, she also doubted CUNY could provide enough Centers for the large number of students who required remediation assistance (pp. 3-4).

Shaughnessy doubted the validity of the City schools’ reading tests; but her solution was to administer better tests: “the first step in grappling with the problem of proficiency would be to tighten and improve testing procedures so that we have dependable information on the students we admit to the City’s colleges” (p. 3). She admitted that some CUNY college remedial programs had failed, and she agreed that both “the fiscal crisis of the City and sense of dissatisfaction, if not failure that many of us feel with the open admissions experience so far urges one to look beyond the present state of things…” (p. 3). As such, Shaughnessy proposed a “new phase or stage of open admissions” that effected “the vertical integration” of the City’s schools and CUNY.

Shaughnessy argued that CUNY’s skills experts had learned a great deal; they were now nationally recognized experts and knew what to do. She recalled how stunned she was when she read her first stack of student papers nine years earlier: “I hadn’t any idea of where to start or what to single out from the mass of problems I found there.” But now, she could look at those
same papers, classify and rank the problems in them and know which ones to fix first. “More important, I know more about the logics that undergird those problems and am neither alarmed nor discouraged by the work ahead” (p. 5). She argued for a new system “where the worn and sad concept of the isolated ‘remedial’ class is finally put to rest” (p. 5). She would export CUNY’s new knowledge to the City’s schools (and was already working on a proposal to do so with a high school administrator) by loaning them skills experts, holding teacher workshops and seminars, and by “creating… a testing unit within the University-high school system that would work toward the development of a common system of diagnostic and proficiency testing” (p. 6). Nothing like this giant new “testing unit” then existed at CUNY.

Shaughnessy expected her vertical integration would take three to five years to implement—suggesting that all problems with underprepared students would then be solved. In the meantime, she suggested that her Center could identify both “problem areas” and teachers of high achievement who could be loaned across the CUNY system to “swiftly” attend to any “weak spots in remedial programs” (p. 7). She also recommended that CUNY “[sharpen] procedures of evaluation and testing so that students who are repeatedly failing, or who reflect, by attendance and performance, a waning interest in college work, be dropped” (p. 8).

There were similarities in Berger and Shaughnessy’s proposals. Both urged open access to the university balanced by tightened retention standards to drop some students in order to save money. But Berger’s proposal followed both the 1965 SEEK model and Bruffee’s 1970 model at Brooklyn. Students were required to pass Bruffee’s mainstream writing course within three semesters or be dropped from the college. But they received assistance in various forms; and their writing teachers decided whether they passed. There was no testing system that governed their fates. By contrast, Shaughnessy’s plan began with more testing. She introduced three
significant ideas to the CUNY Central discussion: First, proficiency tests could pull the City’s schools into “vertical integration” with CUNY’s minimum skills expectations. Second, proficiency tests could also be used to discourage or expel CUNY students. 3) A giant new testing CUNY testing unit could develop and administer this vertically integrated testing system. In addition, Shaughnessy’s examples included writing tests; Kibbee had proposed only reading and mathematics tests.

Healy soon thanked Shaughnessy for her memo, hoping they could “tackle a ‘vertical integration’ directly and immediately” (Healy, 1975, November 6). Within a few weeks, the Chairman of the Board of Trustees wrote her directly to ask for her “personal reactions and constructive suggestions” to two proposals that Kibbee had drafted and the trustees had discussed privately (Giardino, 1975, November 26; Peterson, 1975, November 26). The draft “Admission Policy” called for the same Skills Centers that Shaughnessy, Ballard and Berger had all already opposed, now renamed “Educational Opportunity Centers.” Applicants who were in the bottom third of their high school classes and also had GPAs below 75 would be required to pass reading and arithmetic tests to qualify for admission to any CUNY College. A draft “Enrollment Policy.” CUNY proposed three means to control future enrollments: first, “a reasonable but firm standard of academic progress;” second, “a reasonable standard of basic skills development and academic achievement” for movement or transfer into junior and senior courses at the senior colleges; and, third, other “standards of admission” needed to further limit enrollment to 1974-75 cost levels (Kibbee, 1975, November 24).

**The Board Votes to End Open Admissions (December 15, 1975)**

Three weeks later, a divided Board of Trustees approved versions of Kibbee’s November admissions and enrollment proposals. The Board ended open admissions by requiring all
incoming students to either pass “a skills test given by the University in standard reading and standard arithmetic” or meet “other standards to be developed” (Board, 1975, December 15, p. 165). (This new admissions test was no longer limited to applicants with the lowest grades and class rank.) There was vocal opposition by witnesses, the student representative, and CUNY’s two black trustees during a four-hour debate before the vote. Trustee Franklin Williams threatened a lawsuit against the measure (Peterson, 1975, December 16). The Board also directed the Chancellor to consult and prepare plans for tightening requirements for student progress, including “rational but firm guidelines to require satisfactory student progress” and “reasonable standards of progress and basic skills development for admission to the upper division of the colleges” (Board, 1975, December 15, p. 158). The Board also voted to furlough all faculty members for four weeks without pay and to make other cuts (pp. 158-60).

CUNY expected the new admissions tests to bar 10,000 applicants from the system and save $30 million in remediation costs (Peterson, 1975, December 16). But an “intense, behind-the-scenes dispute” soon broke out within CUNY Central—in part fueled by a new Lavin report that predicted the admissions tests would cut CUNY’s admitted minority students “by more than two-thirds and eventually leave the university with the same racial composition” as before 1970 (Peterson, 1975, December 19). Governor Hugh Carey announced his support for tuition at CUNY and State Education Commissioner Ewald Nyquist reasserted his support. State and City politicians denounced the faculty furlough (Peterson, 1975, December 20). The President of Medgar Evers College and others sued CUNY to block the admissions tests (Trent, 1976, February 9).
Shaughnessy Urges Teachers To Dive-In And Not Guard the Gates (December 1975)

In the midst of these struggles, Shaughnessy traveled to the MLA convention in San Francisco where she delivered her “Diving In” speech to a packed ballroom of entranced teachers of writing (McQuade, 2016, May 26, pp. 10-11). Shaughnessy converted her own experience as an overwhelmed SEEK teacher in 1967 into a parable about learning how to become a better writing teacher of diverse students within an urban university. Again, Shaughnessy’s conflicts surfaced throughout. Twice alluding to Dewey, Shaughnessy challenged deficit models of education that viewed learners “as empty vessels, ready to be filled with new knowledge” (1976, p. 235). She called for teachers to meet students where they were and to recognize their excellence, complexity and potential. She even struggled directly with her own formalism, noting that “simplistic prescriptions…illuminate for the moment and then disappear in the melee of real situations, where paragraphs break down and thoughts will not be regimented” (p. 236).

Shaughnessy openly mocked the defense of minimal standards that turned writing teachers into mere mechanics “of the sentence, the paragraph, and the essay” (p. 236). Recognizing the power of an intertwined writing and thinking process, Shaughnessy argued that a student could not be expected to understand the meaning within his writing when he was forced to write under conditions that did not allow “for the slow generation of an orienting conviction” and an “underlying sense of direction….as one idea engenders another, gradually crowding out from memory the direction he initially set for himself” (p. 238). She criticized “years of right/wrong testing” that left students unprepared for the reality that college did not reward students with shallow test skills, but those who could “sustain a play of mind upon ideas—teasing out the contradictions and ambiguities and frailties of statements” (p. 237).
But the largest conflict emerged in the overall premise of her parable. Mocking tests that placed students into “developmental scales,” she set out a “developmental scheme” for teachers. The best teachers dove-in, met students where they were, developed the courage to “remediate” themselves, studied “new disciplines,” learned to see both their students’ “difficulties and incipient excellence,” and always assumed that their students could be superior to them “in head and in heart” (p. 238). But Shaughnessy labeled the least developed teachers as “guarding the tower… in one way or another concentrating on protecting the academy (including [themselves]) from the outsiders, those who do not seem to belong in the community of learners” (p. 234). Focused solely on the formal deficiencies in their students’ essays, these teachers considered failing them all; such a writing class became “a peculiar and demoralizing contest for both student and teacher, since neither expects to win” (p. 235).

**The Chancellor Presses Forward and Healy Offers Compromise (January-February 1976)**

In January, as Kibbee tried to push forward with his admissions test plan, Shaughnessy’s influence seemed to be growing. Hyman gave Kibbee a list of names that included Shaughnessy for a new committee “to select some university-wide tests” (Hyman, 1976, January 6).

Shaughnessy also joined Maria Perez, Kibbee’s executive assistant, at a Women’s City Club luncheon meeting “about testing of students graduating from high school.” Perez wrote to the Club that Shaughnessy would “be deeply involved in the development of testing for the February 1976 Freshman class (as mandated by the Board)” (Perez, 1976, January; 1976, January 16). In late January, Kibbee invited Shaughnessy to join a “Task Force on High School-College Articulation” that would “examine the underlying assumptions, efficacy and implications of current, proposed and alternative admission criteria” (Kibbee, 1976, January 20).
On January 8th, Healy sent Kibbee, Hyman and Meng his compromise proposal. While educating “as many citizens of new York as is humanly possible,” Healy recognized the needs for a “rational norm” to exclude students beyond their budget and to shift the “burden of remediation” back to the public schools (Healy, 1976, January 8, p. 1). Borrowing from both Shaughnessy and Ballard’s October proposals, Healy proposed a three-year plan in which CUNY would use the existing City schools’ pupil evaluation program (PEP) tests in reading and math to reroute struggling students into intensive remediation courses and even remedial high schools, starting in the ninth grade. CUNY would admit the current 12th graders and then phase in admissions standards over three years, having duly warned the students that they had to improve their high school test scores and skills to be eligible to enter CUNY (pp. 1-3). Healy saw that it was “obvious” that some CUNY colleges would still need “considerable… remedial capacity,” but he thought it could be reduced substantially. He also rejected creations of “‘de-lousing stations’ between [CUNY] and the high schools” (p. 3). And he noted that a “minor advantage of this proposal is that it does not involve the City University either in the development or the administration of a massive testing program” (p. 3).

In early February, Kibbee also invited Shaughnessy to join a separate committee, chaired by Healy, to select the “skills tests in reading and arithmetic” to be used as admissions tests. Kibbee warned the committee members to “come prepared to participate in making the choices that we are mandated to make” (Kibbee, 1976, February 3). Ballard’s files include a draft (and apparently unsent) letter to Healy, as chair of this committee. Ballard accused the Board, Kibbee and Hyman of being “committed to the academic extermination of Blacks and Puerto Ricans from the University;” he asserted that the new admissions tests would “eliminate three-quarters of the Black students and two-thirds of the Puerto Rican and Latin students” who would
otherwise enter CUNY the next fall. He charged that the committee was well aware of the circumstances that caused black and Latino students to under-achieve. He challenged the committee to refuse to “act as ‘good Germans’ [and] instead, reject [their] assignments as educational executioners” (Ballard, 1976, February).

**Kibbee’s Revised Plan to Dismantle CUNY (February 18, 1976)**

In late February, Kibbee circulated a modified proposal. He recognized that open admissions had been a response to the “Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s [which had] brought forcefully to [CUNY’s] consciousness” an awareness that it was excluding black and Latino students. Kibbee argued that while maximizing access, CUNY at the same time had to reduce its size, and protect “its academic strengths” (Kibbee, 1976, February 19, p. 1). Kibbee’s February plan dropped new bombshells. Kibbee proposed consolidating, eliminating or downgrading a number of CUNY’s colleges. He would raise the admissions requirements for the four-year colleges (exempting SEEK students) and would require community college graduates to prove their “proficiency in basic skills” in order to transfer into four-year colleges (p. 2). Graduate programs across CUNY, already slashed by 40% in the fall, would be cut more deeply until all graduate work at CUNY was cut in half (p. 7). He would impose new administrative personnel cuts (p. 11). In one area of compromise, Kibbee softened the December 15 community college entrance requirements. Only applicants with the lowest quarter of GPAs in their schools and with GPAs below 70 would have to take and pass unspecified basic skills admissions tests. Students who failed these tests would be denied full admission but could apply to a new version of the skills centers, now renamed the “University Transition Program” and be considered conditional admits. The new centers would offer only “basic skills courses designed to develop a proficiency level adequate for regular admission” (p. 4).
Kibbee’s plan also tightened retention standards to push out struggling students. Incomplete and withdrawal grades would be sharply curtailed. “No credit” grades would be as punitive as “F”s. Students who did not successfully complete most of their courses and maintain C averages would be quickly put on probation and then “dropped from the University” (pp. 10-11). And all CUNY students advancing to junior status would have to “provide evidence, in ways to be determined by the Chancellor, that they have attained a level of proficiency necessary to cope with advanced work in the academic disciplines” (p. 11). Kibbee estimated that one-third of community college transfer students would fail to meet his new standards (p. 11).


By April, Kibbee’s Task Force on High School-College Articulation was unable to reach agreement. A majority report, supported by a 7-2 vote (and likely including Shaughnessy) essentially endorsed Kibbee’s February community college admissions restrictions, except that they urged more than one year to allow those students who showed effort and progress to reach minimum standards for admission (Weddington, 1976, April 2; CUNY, 1976, April 2). The task force treated students in Kibbee’s “transition” program as CUNY students; they called their approach a “selective retention” policy as opposed to a “selective admissions” policy and they recommended that every community college run its own transition program (pp. 2-3). However the task force also stated their “fervent desire” that open admissions not be curtailed at all (p. 3).

Leonora Leach of Medgar Evers College wrote a minority report. She argued that the task force had failed to fully consider Kibbee’s proposals when it essentially endorsed his community college admissions plan because they ignored the harm caused by his retention proposals:

Kibbee’s proposal, on the face of it, appears to provide open access to CUNY for all N.Y.C. high-school graduates. But when the progression requirements and the provisions
for a proficiency test to determine eligibility for transfer from a two-year college to a four-year college are closely examined, the appearance of open access gives way to the reality of a return to restricted access (Leach, 1976, April 1).

**Shaughnessy Calls For A Firm Hand To Impose A Testing System (April 5, 1976)**

Shaughnessy dispelled any doubts about her views of Kibbee’s proposed new proficiency standards in her April 5, 1976 fifteen-page report of her first year as Director of the Instructional Resource Center. She appears to have timed the report to offer Kibbee support in the April 5, 1976 Board meeting. Shaughnessy recounted how she, despite extremely low funding, had managed to make progress in each of the five areas of her mandated responsibilities during the preceding year. Most significantly, Shaughnessy reported that she had worked diligently since the Spring of 1975 to promote testing systems across CUNY (1976, April 5, pp. 6-8).

Shaughnessy’s job description included “the development of placement tests” and nothing about proficiency tests (p. 2). Yet, over the previous year, Shaughnessy had reviewed and collected literature on testing; created and co-chaired “a task force on the development of a writing proficiency and placement test for use in CUNY”; developed a new writing proficiency test and arranged experimental trials to run within two months; and met with at least five testing experts, including two from ETS, “to consider problems in testing and evaluation among open admissions colleges” (pp. 7-8). Shaughnessy had also actively promoted the adoption of proficiency tests:

Finally, in my various meetings with CUNY teachers, whether as a speaker or consultant, I have been stressing the importance of developing sharply defined performance criteria that will serve not only the University in maintaining its own academic integrity but the high schools in directing their teaching energies toward the real needs of their students…. 
One unexpected result of our work so far has been a growing tendency of teachers and administrators from a range of CUNY colleges to call us in for consultation in particular aspects of skills instruction. In several instances departments have asked us to advise them on the restructuring of their programs or the development of proficiency tests. These invitations we view as the most fruitful of training opportunities and are gratified to note a growing number of requests of this sort (pp. 8, 11).

Even as Shaughnessy gave her “Diving In” speech in San Francisco where she mocked the writing teacher who guarded college towers from students, she was working tirelessly to guard the towers of CUNY with new gateway tests. Shaughnessy warned the chancellors that the idea of a CUNY-wide testing system is deeply, pervasively controversial on several grounds: many claim that there are no adequate instruments for measuring the skills development of young disadvantaged adults and that a university-wide testing system would trap teachers in Regents-type situations that foster cynical and unproductive kinds of instruction among the students who can least afford it; others argue that the professional and life goals of students and the resources of individual colleges range too widely to subject all students to the same performance criteria; still others contend that it is impossible to get the professionals to agree on what constitutes competence in skills, let alone how this competence is best measured. (Thus some in the area of writing insist that fluency and risk taking approaches to vocabulary and syntax are more indicative of progress than is the reduction of grammatical errors and would therefore object to tests that make correctness a central criterion, as most nationally normed tests do.)
I mention all this only to suggest that without a firm implementing hand from the Board and from policy makers on individual campuses, there is no chance of a University-wide testing policy’s being adopted at CUNY. Meanwhile, the Center’s role is to acquaint teachers with the state of the testing art and to support inter-campus efforts at designing both placement and proficiency tests (p. 7).

Shaughnessy had seen the devastation of the City College proficiency exam on the writing teachers and students at City College—especially the SEEK students. She believed that a CUNY-wide testing system would face strong resistance and would likely be defeated. Yet she had quietly worked for an entire year to weaken that resistance and promote gateway testing systems. Now Shaughnessy advised the chancellors to apply “a firm implementing hand” to overcome the remaining opposition.

**Brooklyn Replaces Bruffee’s Writing Program with Grammar Courses and Tests (1975-76)**

At Brooklyn, Bruffee resisted tiered courses, error avoidance pedagogy, and writing exams for about five years. But, in its May 27, 1975 meeting—about two months after Shaughnessy began her campaign at CUNY Central to spread proficiency exams across CUNY—the Brooklyn Faculty Council approved new writing placement tests, mandatory “non-credit-bearing workshops,” and a new writing proficiency exam for all sophomores and transfer students (Murphy, 1976, February 24; Brooklyn, 1975, May 27; Brooklyn, 1975). Brooklyn implemented its Proficiency Exam in December of 1976 (Brooklyn, 1976, November 10).

There are some gaps in the Brooklyn archives. But by February of 1976, Brooklyn had a new WPA (Murphy, 1976, February 24) who advocated a more conservative pedagogy (Brooklyn, 1976, April 7). In March of 1977, Brooklyn’s English department adopted a three-semester, tiered writing course sequence that included a zero-credit “Preparation” course. There
was now a departmental final exam at the end of the sequence. In the mainstream English One
course, students were expected to “be able to write clear, direct prose, with no pattern of errors
(e.g. in complete [sic] or incorrectly punctuated sentences, lack of agreement in subject and verb,
misuse of the pronoun). The student must demonstrate the ability to develop an idea with
coherence and some particularity, and give satisfactory evidence of the habit of clear, correct
writing” (Brooklyn, 1977, March 9).

A Divided Board Adopts Most of Kibbee’s Plan (April 5, 1976)

In a contentious April 5, 1976 meeting, CUNY’s divided Board pushed through most of
Kibbee’s February proposal. The Board: 1) combined the two Staten Island colleges, 2) merged
Hostos into Bronx Community College, 3) limited John Jay’s programs to criminal justice and
fire science, 4) limited four-year college admissions to students with 80% GPAs or those in the
top third of their class, 5) downgraded Medgar Evers to a two-year college, 6) toughened rules
for academic probation and expulsion, 7) reduced graduate programs, and 8) ordered deeper
administrative budget cuts (Board, 1976, April 5, pp. 38-43). The Board ordered that all rising
juniors would have to produce “evidence, in accordance with a standard to be determined by the
Chancellor, that they have attained a level of proficiency in basic learning skills necessary to
cope successfully with advanced work in the academic disciplines” (p. 42). The Board also
approved Kibbee’s compromise community college admissions proposal. Applicants would be
required to have a 70% GPA, or be in the top three-quarters of their class, or pass a GED test, or
pass basic skills tests administered by CUNY. Students who could not meet these requirements
would be offered “conditional admission to a transitional program” supervised by the Board that
would prepare them to pass math and language admission exams (p. 40).
Trustees Franklin Williams, Vinia Quinones and Sandra Lopez Bird resisted these cuts, exclusions and barriers. Quinones offered a minority proposal that attacked the Board’s actions as denying or reducing educational opportunities to mainly the City’s “minority and poor population” (p. 31). The minority proposal specifically attacked enrollment limitations based on skills tests as appearing reasonable on their surface, but actually using inadequate instruments to exclude many “Black and other minority students” who would otherwise succeed at CUNY (p. 33). After Kibbee’s plan was approved by the divided Board, Williams argued “the impact of [these] actions is going to be felt disproportionately by…. the Black, Puerto Rican and poor residents of New York.” Then, he resigned from the Board (p. 47). Quinones also reasserted her opposition. She believed the Board’s plan was unsound and “unduly harsh on those who can least afford it” (p. 49). Bird found “the whole plan unacceptable” (p. 45). She condemned the Board’s actions as racist:

Because this Board has elected to specifically eliminate those programs that serve the special needs of the City’s minorities and poor, because it has elected to take this action now, knowing that free tuition, the last stronghold of education for the disadvantaged, will be eliminated in the near future, because it has elected to slap the City’s Hispanic, Black and poor in the face, I condemn those actions as racist, irrational and irresponsible (p 49).

Some of these Board decisions were soon reversed. Hostos successfully resisted its merger into BCC (Tomasson, 1976, June 15). Medgar Evers resisted its conversion into a community college (Cummings, 1976, July 22). The new community college admissions requirements were eliminated (Board, 1977, May 18-19, p. 48). But CUNY Central quickly began to press for more
restrictive grading, suspension and expulsion standards as well as new “proficiency” standards in “basic learning skills.”

**Ballard and Healy Resign (April-May 1976)**

Within days after the Board’s actions on April 5th, Ballard arranged his return to teach at City College (Ballard, 1976, April 9). On April 15, Healy announced he was leaving CUNY to be president of Georgetown University (Maeroff, 1976, April 16). Ballard then wrote an angry April 24, 1976 speech, entitled “They Don’t Care Anymore” about the “dissection of City University” and the “termination” of open admissions (Ballard, 1976, April 24, p. 1). Ballard argued that Kibbee and the Board had dismantled CUNY, intending to eliminate “Black students, Black faculty and Black administrators” (pp. 5-6). Although Ballard argued that the “battle is not over yet,” he believed that “this will have been the most devastating blow dealt the Black community in years” as 50-60,000 black CUNY students would not be replaced and 1,000 to 2,000 black educators would “be thrown out of jobs.” In sum Ballard believed that CUNY administrators had “destroyed their own institution in order to oust the black spot” (p. 7).

Two weeks later, Kibbee assigned Ballard to co-ordinate with Medgar Evers to end its bachelor degree programs as it was downgraded to a community college (Kibbee, 1976, May 6). The next day, Ballard resigned (Ballard, 1976, May 7).

**CUNY Imposes Tuition and Enrollments Plummet (1976-1978)**

For a year, CUNY’s administrators and trustees had demeaned, discredited and dismantled their own university, all ostensibly in order to save free tuition. They had erected new admission and retention gateways designed to exclude or to expel the system’s least valued

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80 There are angry draft documents in Ballard’s files that he did not send. This speech looks finished and has a specific date, but the audience is not specified and Ballard is uncertain if he delivered it to an audience or circulated it in CUNY’s Central office (Ballard, 2016, July 22).
students. They ended open admissions. They fired thousands of diverse, energetic teachers and other employees. They slashed graduate programs. They underfunded and understaffed departments, devastating instruction. They merged or downgraded whole colleges. They planned new rising-junior assessments to block or exclude otherwise successful students. Although CUNY’s reputation had always depended on the reputation of its students, throughout 1975-1976, CUNY’s leaders poisoned public perceptions of its own students with a relentless public drumbeat of accusations that most were inadequate, illiterate, innumerate, remedial and basic.

Yet, as the three dissident trustees predicted, CUNY’s Board was soon forced to impose tuition anyway; in May the entire university ran out of money and shut down, forcing it to postpone final exams and graduations (Fiske, 1976, June 2). Several trustees resigned and were replaced. The new Board then imposed tuition comparable to SUNY (Board, 1976, June 1, pp. 80-81).

Kibbee’s original 1975 “delousing” center plan intended to exclude 3,000 of the students he least valued (Shaughnessy, 1975, October 27). But CUNY’s four-year colleges admissions plummeted in the fall of 1976 and Kibbee instead lost 10,000 of the students he valued the most. As shown in Table Ten, in Fall 1976, CUNY admitted only 10,982 incoming four-year college students—about half as many as it had admitted in both 1974 and 1975. And, for the first time, CUNY admitted far more two-year college students than four-year college students, as two-year college admissions held steady from 1974 to 1978. In 1977 and 1978, the four-year college admissions remained far below the 1974-1975 levels. Kibbee also predicted that imposing tuition would reduce CUNY’s total enrollment by 10,000 students (Fiske, 1976, June 2). He badly underestimated the damage CUNY’s leaders had caused. As shown in Table Ten, CUNY’s total
undergraduate enrollment dropped in one year by about 42,000 students, and it continued to drop over the next two years.

Table 10: City University Fall First-Year Student Admissions and Total Undergraduate Enrollments 1974 to 1978
(Drawn from CUNY Data Books 1974-1978.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Four-Year College Admissions</th>
<th>Two-Year College Admissions</th>
<th>Total CUNY Admissions</th>
<th>Total Undergraduate CUNY Enrollment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall 1974</td>
<td>21,565</td>
<td>20,405</td>
<td>41,970</td>
<td>220,968</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 1975</td>
<td>21,575</td>
<td>18,780</td>
<td>40,368</td>
<td>223,738</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 1976</td>
<td>10,982</td>
<td>18,301</td>
<td>29,283</td>
<td>181,752</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 1977</td>
<td>13,486</td>
<td>20,335</td>
<td>33,821</td>
<td>173,639</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 1978</td>
<td>13,156</td>
<td>19,144</td>
<td>32,300</td>
<td>163,439</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By the spring of 1977, CUNY had so few applicants that it sent recruiters into high schools with simplified application forms and the power to offer instant admission to both CUNY’s two and four-year colleges. In addition to the new tuition, CUNY faced confusion about financial aid, apathy among weaker students toward college, perceptions that open admissions and SEEK had ended, and uncertainty about the future of CUNY. Qualifying grades for Brooklyn, Hunter, City and Queens dropped from 87 to 80. CUNY was desperate to maintain funding based on student counts and worried that fewer students could prompt further cuts. A CUNY official told the New York Times: “We are running scared.” CUNY officials worried about further “watering down” of applicant quality. But if new applications did not materialize, Meng told the New York Times: “We’ll accept everybody” (Ferretti, 1977, March 2).

Now needing to admit every possible student, in May of 1977, the Board “clarified” its April 5, 1976 decision to exclude some students in “transitional programs” outside the university. Instead, the Board matriculated all those students (Board, 1977, May 18-19, p. 48; Renfro & Amour-Garb, 1999, p. 32).
Deeper Problems in City College’s Writing Program (1975-77)

At City College, problems were growing. In March of 1975, lecturer Pat Lawrence and assistant professor Bill Herman cited the “basic dissatisfaction… some of us have felt” with Shaughnessy’s program. “Broadly speaking, not only is the failure rate too high in the sequence, with many students repeating courses a number of times, but the achievement level of those passing through the sequence is frustratingly uneven” (Lawrence & Herman, 1975, March 20, p. 1). They suggested several structural changes. But all plans for reform were dashed by the 1975-76 budget cuts and layoffs.

By 1975, many of the writing courses were now taught by adjuncts. But the college also assigned tenured faculty from other departments to teach writing courses beginning in the fall of 1974. From Fall 1975 to Fall 1976, 70 writing sections were taught by tenured faculty assigned from other departments (Skurnik, 1977, January, pp. 1-2). Failure rates in all the writing courses climbed, as did failure rates on the Proficiency Examination (p. 2). Failure rates for non-SEEK students in all Basic Writing courses over the three semesters from Fall 1975 to Fall 1976 ran from 22 to 37%. SEEK student failure rates in all writing courses ran from 24 to 41% (pp. 3-4). Budget cuts in 1975 also forced Skurnik to run six 100-student lecture versions of writing courses. She ran three more 100-student writing sections in the Spring of 1976 (p. 2).

Lay-offs continued. In the summer of 1976, 26 full-time members of the City College English Department were “retrenched.” The department was now hiring adjuncts to teach writing courses; but many of them were laid off too. Chairman James Greene noted that the layoffs were done in strict seniority, “which meant that women and minorities recently hired suffered inordinately” (Greene, 1977, August, p. 2 Chair report). In the fall of 1976, the “imposition of tuition… caused enrollment in Basic Writing to drop by over 1,000 students,” while more budget
cuts still increased class sizes from 21 to 25 (Skurnick, 1977, January, p. 1). Skurnick had to run three more 100-student writing sections because additional lay-offs left too few faculty to cover the courses (p. 2). Skurnick did not know why so many students were failing. And she could not make any plans to improve the courses, given the havoc played on the courses by reduced budgets (pp. 2-3).
Chapter Sixteen

CUNY Central Imposes a New High-Stakes Testing System (1976 to 1978)

On January 1, 1977, Shaughnessy published *Errors and Expectations: A Guide For the Teacher of Basic Writing* to wide acclaim (Harris, 2012, p. 103). While brilliantly written and deeply sympathetic to the writing struggles of students, as Joseph Harris notes, it was an intellectually conservative “book about teaching grammar,” at odds with much emerging composition scholarship in the 1970s, and the CCCC 1974 statement on the Students’ Right to Their Own Language (Harris, 2012, pp. 105-9). There were few early critics while Shaughnessy was publicly ill or in the dozen years following her tragic death. As Harris has noted, John Rouse did sharply criticize *Errors* in 1979 (Harris, 2012, pp. 102-04). Among other things, Rouse accused Shaughnessy of promoting teaching grammar although she knew “it has no support whatever in research evidence” (Rouse, 1979, p. 3).

In *Errors*, Shaughnessy analyzed the formal deficiencies in four thousand City College applicant placement test essays (1977, p. 4). Her opening paragraphs included scattered, veiled references to the desegregation of white colleges “in response to the protests of” the 1960s, and the resulting admittance of students who some teachers had “already decided were ineducable” (p. 1). But by page two, Shaughnessy dropped the realities of racism and neatly divided all students into three tiers, based on their writing errors (p. 2). The bottom tier, mostly from the City’s “racial or ethnic enclaves,” (p. 3) were “BW students” or “basic writers.” In subsequent chapters on handwriting and punctuation, syntax, common errors, spelling, and vocabulary,

81 Criticism of *Errors* was muted until Min-Zhan Lu charged in 1991 that Shaughnessy had propagated “an essentialist view of language and a politics of linguistic innocence” (1991, p. 37). After Lu, a series of scholars have criticized Shaughnessy’s formalism and accommodationism. But others, including Maher (1997), Soliday (2002) and McBeth (2007) have continued to laud her as a positive teaching and/or WPA model.
Shaughnessy built an extended argument by definition for the existence of basic writers—a bottom tier of college students who could be easily identified by their patterns of sentence errors on timed writing tests. 82 Shaughnessy agreed that competence could not be judged based on timed tests for most writers; but she believed that “the conditions of writing seem to matter less” for these basic writers (pp. 4-5).

Shaughnessy’s conflicts emerged from time to time. In her chapter on syntax errors, Shaughnessy veered into a seven-page detour about the importance of writing process and collaborative learning. “Teachers themselves promote [a] narrow and inhibiting view of perfection by ignoring all stages of the writing process except the last, where formal correctness becomes important…” (p. 79). Restricted to write about fixed topics, the basic writer was “undone” because he was cut “off from the impulse to say something, or from the sense that anything he might say [was] important to anyone else,” making his sentence errors far worse (pp. 86-87). In her conclusion, Shaughnessy argued that colleges “must be prepared to make more than a graceless and begrudging accommodation to this unpreparedness, opening their doors with one hand and then leading students into an endless corridor of remedial anterooms with the other” (p. 293).

As a 1960s City College teacher, Shaughnessy loved her students. Like the other SEEK teachers, she gave students her home phone number; she tirelessly tutored and befriended them, including Marvina White. But even then, Shaughnessy doubted teacher assessments as mere “feelings.” As she sought ever more efficient ways to teach grammar and measure errors, Shaughnessy retrogressed the sophisticated SEEK English program at City College into her

82 The label basic writer would be widely adopted and quickly molded to suit powerful institutional politics and deficit pedagogies across the country. Joseph Trimmer noted in 1987 that the 900 colleges he surveyed defined “basic writer” in 700 different ways (p. 4).
Basic Writing program which gradually reduced students from complex, capable individuals into error-counts on timed, prompted tests, efficiently segregated them into tiers, and labeled many as “basic.” By 1970, Shaughnessy began to market and export her tiered courses and writing exams to other colleges. As a CUNY dean beginning in 1975, Shaughnessy further promoted errors pedagogy, tiered courses, and more writing tests. In October of 1975, she advocated a test-centric, vertical integration of skills instruction in the City’s schools and colleges, all administered by a new CUNY central testing unit, together with sharpened testing to expel struggling students. In September of 1976, Shaughnessy began to promote, defend, shape and rationalize a massive new, CUNY-wide testing system.

**CUNY’s Senate Faculty Committee Begins to Plan New Exams (September 1976)**

Healy wrote to the Faculty Senate on May 19, 1976, asking them to appoint committees to work with his office to develop tighter retention guidelines and new rising-junior/transfer student proficiency standards. The first committee worked over the summer and prepared the retention guidelines. The Faculty Senate also appointed a new “Committee on Proficiency Skills,” chaired by professor Ruth Milberg-Kaye to work on the new proficiency standards (Valinsky, 1976, September 29; CUNY, 1976, September 14). While the faculty Senate guarded their “primary responsibility for academic matters” (Valinsky, 1976, September 29, p. 1), Healy’s inclusive approach allowed the central administrators significant informal influence. Milberg-Kaye met with McGrath to plan the committee’s work (p. 1). Raymond Murphy, a member of Healy’s staff, sat on the Senate Committee. Shaughnessy formed new faculty expert task forces on reading, writing and math evaluation to assist and guide the Senate Committee (Shaughnessy, 1976, September 13; 1976, September 21).
The Senate Committee first met on September 14, 1976. They agreed at once that the new proficiency standards would be tests, not grades (CUNY, 1976, September 14, p. 1). The committee settled on three questions to consider next: “1) What are the skills to be tested? 2) How will those skills be tested? 3) What procedure will the committee use to implement its work?” (p. 2).

Brenner’s Proficiency Exam Memo Raises Alarms (Fall 1976)

At about this time, Kibbee promoted Egon Brenner to replace Healy. The 51-year-old electrical engineer had spent his entire adult life at City College as a student, instructor, dean, provost and vice president for academic affairs (Vice president, 1974, March 30). Three days after the faculty committee met for the first time, Brenner wrote a four-page memo, entitled “The BHE Resolution on ‘Movement of Students’ to the Upper Division Discussion of Implementation” (Brenner, 1976, September 17). In a logical, numbered outline format, Brenner recognized that proficiency could be determined by tests or course grades. But he rejected course grades because they did not always reflect basic verbal and math skills, grades sometimes reflected progress rather than proficiency, courses varied among the colleges, and Brenner believed the Board was dissatisfied with grades and preferred a test (p. 2).

Brenner proposed that an appropriate, “preferably objective” test could be used if it met three conditions: “A. The test is valid. B. The test neither is, nor is perceived to be by students, a punitive hurdle to be overcome. [and] C. The consequence of testing is beneficial to the student’s education, even if the student fails [the] test” (p. 2). Brenner assumed those conditions could be met without discussion. He proposed implementing a new “test, or more probably battery of tests” across CUNY beginning in four months (pp. 3-4). All first-year and transfer students would be tested upon entry. First-year students who passed would be done with the tests. Those
who failed would be placed into appropriate remedial, developmental or compensatory courses. They would then be counseled to retake the tests, and would be required to do so after completing about 30 credits. Those who failed again would receive assistance and retake the tests. But until they passed the tests they could not advance into the “upper division.” Transfers who failed the tests either would be denied admission, or would be offered limited non-matriculate admission into courses which “explicitly” taught basic skills (p. 3). Brenner’s City College roots were evident. Except for his preference for objective tests, he basically proposed an expansion of the City College writing proficiency exam/basic writing system—the same system that had increasingly failed over the previous five years and was in utter total ruins by 1976.

Brenner’s memo unleashed a wave of criticism.\(^{83}\) He sent it to college deans and the CUNY Central administrators. When the Senate Committee met for their second meeting on Friday, September 24, 1976, Murphy gave them copies and told them Brenner had already scheduled meetings with college deans for the following Monday and Tuesday to “accept comments… regarding proficiency.” The faculty committee at once objected both to Brenner’s memo and his meetings with the deans (CUNY, 1976, September 27). The chair of the Faculty Senate then wrote Kibbee to complain that Brenner had usurped the authority of the faculty, declared the matter at impasse, and ordered the committee to suspend further meetings (Valinsky, 1976, September 29).

CUNY Central had offered little public information about its proficiency testing plans. But Brenner’s memo soon leaked out to SEEK and College Discovery program faculty—who

\(^{83}\) It seems that Shaughnessy had no involvement with Brenner’s memo. Although she had two copies in her files, there are no drafts or notes about the memo before it was sent. Skurnick sent Shaughnessy a copy in November; Shaughnessy appears to have added various skeptical margin notes and question marks (Skurnick, 1976, November 19).
realized that CUNY central was planning a new gateway testing program that targeted their students. The Queens SEEK program faculty had been concerned that the April 5, 1976 proficiency resolution contained “a number of words and phrases that are conspicuously obscure” (Queens, 1976, p. 1). Now Brenner’s memo confirmed their fears and they objected: “As faculty, we have observed at close range that many of our students do in fact have substantial unmet academic needs. However, one of those needs is not to be further punished and ultimately excluded from an education at CUNY” (p. 2). The Queens SEEK teachers concluded that this new standard was intended “to remove a substantial segment of the student population that some have always wanted to exclude and now find timely rationalization in the City’s Fiscal Crisis” (p. 2). Refusing to endorse this plan to “blame the victim,” the Queens SEEK teachers listed a series of problems with the validity and effects of standardized tests. They argued that such tests discriminate, fail to predict success, label students, conflate judgments about innate ability, create low expectations which become self-fulfilling prophecies of failure, foster shallow thinking, distort curriculum, distort student self images and aspirations, invade privacy, distort ideas of academic competency, and “perpetuate a ‘mythological meritocracy’ that makes education a game played by a charmed circle; real learning is lost” (pp. 3-4).

The Queens SEEK argument that CUNY’s administrators had questionable motives was borne out by CUNY’s rapidly changing circumstances. In 1975-1976, CUNY administrators argued they needed to cut students and budgets to save free tuition. By the fall of 1976, CUNY was charging tuition and enrollment was plummeting. The system’s needs had reversed: it had to recruit and retain students in order to preserve its funding and prevent a further downward spiral. CUNY had already tightened its grading, probation and expulsion rules. But now it was adding an additional layer of testing gateways to block, expel or exclude students who were otherwise
successful—the same tests that Brenner imagined would somehow benefit the same students they expelled or excluded.

The City College SEEK Department complained as well. “We disagree that a condition can exist in which tests neither are, nor are perceived to be by students a punitive hurdle to be overcome….We disagree that ‘the consequences of testing are beneficial to the student’s education even if the student fails the test.’ We fail to see the benefits to students” (City College 1976, November 22, p. 1). Among the signatories to this protest letter was Marvina White; White entered City College as a 1966 SEEK student, graduated four years later, and had become the supervisor of the City College Writing Center (p. 2).

But the most thorough attack on Brenner’s memo came from another vice chancellor. J. Joseph Meng was a 38-year-old former law professor (Former BU, 2001, April 19). In 1971, he reminded Ballard that open admissions was premised on a rejection of tests as valid measures of student achievement and he suggested that mandated placement tests be replaced by combined, more flexible measures (Meng, 1971, March 10). In a late September response to Brenner, Meng considered Brenner’s three conditions for tests to be useful. Meng argued it was impossible both that tests that actually blocked or excluded many students could also benefit them. Such tests could not be perceived by students as non-punitive (p. 1). They could not be viewed as valid because their only stated purpose was to conserve resources by excluding students who could not succeed in advanced coursework (Meng, 1976, September 29, p. 2). But CUNY’s experience showed that many students with low test scores would succeed given the opportunity—the very reason CUNY had adopted open admissions (pp. 2-3). Meng also had little doubt that the invalid, punitive tests would target “predominantly minority” students (p. 3).
Meng recognized that any perception that CUNY’s standards were dropping was a serious problem. But he pointed out that new, tougher grading and retention rules had just addressed such concerns. All students would have to complete two years of coursework in a more challenging environment to reach junior status. “Grades are used to signify satisfactory performance and proficiency.” As such, any new rising junior test had the perverse effect of invalidating 64 credits of university coursework. “We could never admit that” (p. 4). Meng also predicted that the test would be expensive to administer and would distort curriculum: “Our faculty will teach to the test” (p. 4). Meng urged that no new tests were necessary and the Chancellor could instead adopt good academic standing through 64 credits as the requisite standard for continuation of coursework (p. 5). Noting that the any such test system “unfairly shifts the professional obligations of the faculty to the students and does little to remedy the problem,” Meng suggested that new tests could be non-punitive only if they were used diagnostically or for programmatic review, rather than to “penalize a student for the insufficiencies of the faculty” (p. 4).

Handwritten notations on Kibbee’s file copy suggest Meng’s memo was discussed in the Chancellor’s inner circle on October 6, 1976. Meng’s memo demonstrates that there were differing views among the chancellors. Healy had also opposed a new testing system nine months earlier. A new testing system was not inevitable. Kibbee had shifted his plans several times already in response to pressures inside and outside the system. But Kibbee did not change course now; he merely shifted tactics. Brenner’s blunt bullying was replaced with Shaughnessy’s subtle persuasion.
Shaughnessy Steers the Faculty Committee (1976-1977)

In mid-October, Shaughnessy gave a presentation to Raymond Murphy and others on writing evaluation. After the meeting, Murphy drafted a list of testing questions for Shaughnessy and asked to tape record their talk about them (Murphy, 1976, October 14). In mid-November, the faculty committee met again and at once began to discuss “the role of Dean Shaughnessy’s committees” based on a memo from Shaughnessy that described her expert task forces (Minutes, 1976, mid-November, p. 1). Shaughnessy’s helpful task forces were “informal and [had] no policy-making powers. Members were chosen on the basis of their experience with skills teaching and evaluation at CUNY.” They were concerned with criteria, forms of testing, and the point “at which students should be tested” (Shaughnessy, 1976, November 17). These were, of course, exactly the same issues left for the committee itself to determine.

Shaughnessy had already recruited CAWS members to survey programs around CUNY (Sterling, 2015, March 28, p. 8-9). Sterling recalls: “she would bring us to the Instructional Resource Center and basically exploit us…. You couldn’t really say no to her” (p. 7). Sterling also remembers that the new CUNY tests were connected to scrutiny of the SEEK program:

And so they said, well there’s no accountability in these programs, you know, and so we need a test…. I don't know anybody that thought it was a genuine reflection of the learning of students, but it was a skill they could learn, for the most part, and get through…. it was just a time waster, and annoying. I never felt that we had a choice because… the status of the SEEK programs… was not very high and there was a lot of talk in the university in the different colleges that, you know, “Who are these students?” and “Are they really college material?” All of that kind of discussion that was going on

84 The meeting dates on these draft minutes are inconsistent. They were prepared on November 29 and the Shaughnessy handout is dated November 17.
all the time and we were—in a certain sense, pressured to show that these students could make it…. (p. 13).

Shaughnessy asked her colleagues to prepare materials about writing and assessment. Then she used those materials to influence the faculty committee. Brereton recalls:

One year Mina came to Richard, Sondra, and myself and asked us if we’d be willing to work on a committee to devise a CUNY wide assessment test. We knew that this was not Mina’s idea. [It] was thrust on her by the Central Board of Higher Education…. and so we did what we could….

Right away, Richard, Sondra, and I were quite unhappy with the idea that it would be a one-shot… high-stakes test and it was a pass/fail situation…. Richard, and Sondra, and I tried to work out a way to get a revision—a chance for revision—or a way to have two tests rather than a single one. Again we were thinking about those students who were going to be washed out of the City University and clearly that’s what the purpose of this test was going to be; to get rid of the students who are not succeeding at writing. [And] we were very unhappy about the criteria that was sort of given to us by Mina, and we didn’t have any choice about how this was going to be scored or how it was going to be implemented (Brereton, 2015, November 11, pp. 11-12).

Brereton, Perl, Sterling and other writing teachers were opposed to the new tests. But by enlisting the assistance of CAWS members, Shaughnessy both reduced resistance within CAWS and suggested to the Senate Committee that the tests were good writing pedagogy. Shaughnessy herself wrote a “Statement on Criteria for Writing Proficiency” for the committee (Shaughnessy, 1976, November 22). On December 17, 1976, Shaughnessy appeared as the committee’s invited guest, together with Brereton, Skurnick, and two members of her reading task force. The
committee asked Shaughnessy many questions and she shared a chart showing courses and exams at CUNY campuses (CUNY Minutes, 1976, December 17, p. 2).  

**Shaughnessy Admits the New Tests Target Minority Students (December 5, 1976)**

In December, Shaughnessy wrote a note to Murphy; she had been thinking about testing: There is widespread (and I believe justified) concern that the tests designed to identify proficient upper-classmen will in fact result in a racial imbalance in CUNY’s student population…. If there is this possibility of a large-scale screening out of minority students, then the University should make absolutely certain that there is no basis for any charge that any imbalance that results is consciously or unconsciously a result of discriminatory testing (Shaughnessy, 1976, December 5, p. 1).

Shaughnessy believed there might be a parallel between CUNY and unlawfully biased employer tests (p. 1). She thought they “would have to admit” that CUNY’s tests would not meet the EEOC’s fairness standards because CUNY had failed to explain how proficiency in the tests related to the actual tasks students would be required to perform (p. 1). She doubted whether valid reading tests even existed “for proficiency testing at the end of remedial instruction” (p. 2).

No one had “developed a model for the kind of testing” they proposed to do; even in developing a battery of placement tests, California had worked for over a year “in extensive research and widespread consultation with experts within and outside their systems” (p. 2). By contrast, that CUNY “should set out to test its students to determine whether they can continue in college,… according to a timetable and budget that would make the development of a responsible

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85 Sterling prepared a similar report for Shaughnessy, perhaps the one she gave out to the committee. Sterling’s report stated that six of nine senior colleges and three out of eight community colleges had independently adopted proficiency tests (Sterling, 1976, pp. 1-2).
assessment plan impossible is certain to strike many both within and outside the university as a most desperate and educationally irresponsible move” (p. 3).

In light of these deep problems, Shaughnessy suggested to Murphy that they abandon “penalized testing” and instead develop “supportive testing.” They could abandon the centralized testing system and instead create a new “assessment center of commission” that would study and advise colleges on their individual testing systems and offer diagnostic tests for students and programmatic assessment survey tests for the whole system (p. 3). She wondered if the tests were necessary at all. “We have not had enough time with the new retention standards to determine how effectively they will serve to discourage unqualified students from hanging on. Certainly the standards are intended to achieve that purpose. If so, penalized testing would be a redundant and unwelcome function to impose upon the University at this time” (p. 3).

CUNY Testing Plan Shifts To Creating a Punitive Remedial Sub-Track (Spring 1977)

After her December note to Murphy, Shaughnessy’s doubts about testing did not reappear. By January, the Senate Committee began drafting its report, under pressure from Brenner to move quickly (Milberg-Kaye, 1977, January 8). But their entire focus shifted. Instead of a rising junior exam, they began to devise a system of placement tests, remedial sub-tracks and high-stakes remedial course exit exams (CUNY Minutes, 1977, January 27). Murphy and Shaughnessy discussed, commented on, and influenced several drafts of the Faculty Committee’s report (CUNY, February 4, 1977; Murphy 1977, February 10; 1977, February 11; 1977, February 23). Murphy and Shaughnessy were also still thinking about rising-junior tests. He asked her for a valid reading test; she replied there were none. However, a rising junior writing test “poses none of these problems….I therefore urge the committee to abandon its plan to
require a reading test for mid-point assessment and to support, rather, the administration of a writing test” (Shaughnessy, 1977, February 10, pp. 2-3).

In March the Faculty Committee issued its formal report. They recommended a first-year student testing system with three new gateways. Upon entry all students would take one of four proposed standard reading tests. Those scoring less than an eleventh grade level would be required to “enroll in an appropriate remedial program.” They could only exit that program by retaking and passing another version of the same test (CUNY, 1977 March, p. 5). Near “or after the completion” of first-year writing courses or sequences, all CUNY students would take a CUNY writing proficiency exam. “The examination will be based on a reading selection and will consist of a written essay of from 350 to 500 words which students will have two hours to complete. It will be centrally graded by University faculty specially trained in the holistic pass/fail method” (p. 6). All entering students would also take a CUNY arithmetic and algebra placement exam. Students who failed the exam would be placed into “an appropriate remedial program” of math courses and they could only exit by passing another version of the same exam (p. 7). Students would also be required to take and pass an additional math course although they could substitute high school courses or be exempted by additional proficiency exams (p. 7).

On March 17, 1977 the Senate Committee met with Kibbee, CUNY central administrators (including Shaughnessy) and deans from seven colleges to discuss their report. They confirmed their recommendations. “Although there were some suggestions that an entrance examination should also be given in writing, the Committee members were firm in their belief that the writing proficiency test should be given after the regular English course or sequence” (CUNY, 1977, March 17, p. 2). Kibbee then turned the matter over to Brenner for further consultation and final recommendations (p. 3).
The March 1977 report must have been a complete surprise to almost the entire CUNY system. Brenner’s September 1975 memo had threatened only rising-junior tests. Shaughnessy, Murphy, Brenner and perhaps a few other CUNY central administrators had worked with the committee from January to March when it pivoted to propose an entirely new high-stakes testing system that would affect every CUNY student and would trap many of them into punitive, remedial sub-tracks. Complicating any resistance among writing teachers, in March of 1977, Shaughnessy was diagnosed with kidney cancer (Maher, 1997, p. 200). Her illness was soon public knowledge and new sympathies intensified the already powerful loyalty of her friends and colleagues. And Shaughnessy told her colleagues that resistance to the tests was futile (Brereton, 2016, November 11, p. 11).

In May, CAWS tried to intervene, arguing that there were “essential requirements for any valid, fair and useful writing examination” and offering to form a committee of writing instructors to conduct a pilot program of a two-essay test conducted in two different sessions (Carling, 1977, May 17). But Brenner and Shaughnessy were now pushing forward on their own.

These tests and sub-tracks had all been conceived as ways to drop students and reduce remediation costs eighteen months earlier. In that sense, CUNY’s administrators deliberately intended the new system to discourage and defeat many students. Brenner’s September 1976 suggestion that such a new testing system might not be perceived as a “punitive hurdle” or could somehow be “be beneficial” to students who failed it had been met by derision by the Queens and City College SEEK teachers, as well as by Meng, the law professor. In her December, 1976 memo to Murphy, Shaughnessy directly recognized that they were developing a “penalized” testing system that would target non-white students. In this way, the harm to students of the new system was more deliberate than myopic.
But a convenient myopia had been at work all along and that now became manifest. The administrators had rationalized obvious harm of a punitive testing system as necessary to cut costs to save free tuition and to tighten academic standards. But December of 1976, the free tuition battle had been lost. CUNY no longer needed to expel or exclude students; rather it needed to enroll as many as possible and its cost-cutting rationale no longer existed. In addition, as Meng pointed out, CUNY had also toughened both its grading and retention standards, so the university did not also need a new testing system to protect its minimal academic standards. Yet Shaughnessy and Brenner, with Kibbee’s support, continued to push the testing system forward. The CUNY administrators chose not to see the massive harm they were about to cause or which students they would harm the most.

**Shaughnessy Promotes Testing in Her Newsletter (1976-1977)**

Even while she battled cancer, Shaughnessy continued to shape and promote what had become a new CUNY freshman minimum skills testing system. Shaughnessy had included positive testing stories in the Center’s *Resource* newsletter beginning with its first issue. Richmond College was developing new reading, writing and math placement tests (CUNY, 1976, February, p. 2). A group of English teachers was designing a new writing test that would measure, not only “spelling, punctuation [and] mechanical correctness,” but also good thesis statements and sustained discussion (p. 2). A new encyclopedia of evaluation was a “useful guide” (CUNY, 1976a, May, p. 4). The Center promised to gather information on “testing and reading proficiency” and summarized three reading test articles (CUNY, 1976b, May, p. 10). Shaughnessy’s *Journal of Basic Writing* was calling for articles for its third issue on “uses of grammar that are responsive to the needs of basic writing students” as well as its fourth issue on “evaluation” (CUNY, 1976, November, p. 13).
But in April of 1977, Resource became more pointed about the advantages of proficiency testing. It reported that York College had approved a rising-junior writing proficiency exam in fall of 1975. “English faculty who did not strongly support a proficiency exam initially, now mostly favor it” (CUNY, 1977, April, p. 20). Courses were aligning with the new exam, helping students prepare for it. Faculty members were reviewing tests with failing students and offering ways to study for them. Test preparation group workshops were held periodically. In addition, the faculty at York hope their students will be prepared both academically and psychologically for the time when the [CUNY Board] will mandate its own proficiency; and finally, it is hoped that the proficiency will raise standards generally at the college….Growing numbers of students… have begun to accept the proficiency exam even as they groan that success in course work should be enough (p. 20).

Brenner and Kibbee Finalize the Testing System (July-September 1977)

In late July or August of 1977, Brenner issued his “Freshman Skills Assessment” testing proposal. For the most part, Brenner ratified the Senate Faculty report. But he overruled the Senate Committee in two key ways: following the reading and math test models, the new writing test would also be a placement test followed by a high-stakes remediation exit test. Students would have to pass the new test before they could take mainstream composition courses (Brenner, 1977, July 11, p.12). The entire battery of high-stakes remediation exit tests now served as a protracted entrance requirement across all four-year and two-year colleges and created a punitive sub-tier for the entire system.

Kibbee moved quickly. In mid-September, he called a September 30, 1977 meeting for some administrators (including Shaughnessy), the Senate Committee members, and faculty representatives from ten colleges (Murphy, 1977, September 16). The meeting served mainly to
rubberstamp Brenner’s proposal. He did most of the talking, supported briefly by Shaughnessy and Ruth Milberg-Kaye (CUNY, 1977, September 30). Some present complained about testing writing as a remediation exit requirement, but Brenner held firm (p. 2). Centralized grading of the 30-40,000 writing exams produced each year was abandoned as too burdensome. Shaughnessy reinforced the importance of “setting university-wide standards” and opined that students might require multiple semesters to upgrade their skills enough to pass the new exit exam (p. 4).


One indication that the September 30 meeting was just a formality was that Shaughnessy had already written Brenner a four-page “Preliminary Plan for Testing Program.” She included an outline of tasks, a list of administrative and advisory staff needs, an implementation timetable to begin CUNY-wide testing in September of 1978, and a short progress report (Shaughnessy, 1977, September 29). In early October, Brenner sent Shaughnessy’s eight-page “Plan for the CUNY Testing Program” to Kibbee (Brenner, 1977, October 5; Shaughnessy, 1977, October 3). Her plan included a proposed organization chart for a new testing unit, showing Shaughnessy as the chair of its advisory board (Brenner, 1977, September 30).

Shaughnessy’s plan began with a rationale for the new testing system, much of which echoed her October 1975 memo where she had proposed a new CUNY central testing unit and using new tests to drop struggling students. Shaughnessy framed CUNY’s open admissions commitment as merely to “admit poorly prepared high school graduates and to accept the responsibility for remediating that poor preparation within a limited time” (p. 1). Shaughnessy then argued that implicit within the challenge of open admissions “was the obligation to assess results” (p. 1). Echoing her October 1975 memo, she labeled the previous seven years as “the
first stage of open admissions” (p. 1). She praised the diversity of approaches to “skills training” as maintaining vitality and avoiding the “lock-step” approaches that had “been so deadly in other settings” (p. 1). But Shaughnessy argued that “a clear and stable articulation of performance criteria” was necessary to keep that diversity from undermining “the quality of its education and thereby [perpetuating] the very inequities that gave rise to remediation in the first place” (p. 1). (In this way, Shaughnessy subtly argued that the tests were necessary to prevent worsening the harm of racism on CUNY students—even though in December of 1976, she had admitted to Murphy that such tests would target and expel minority students without any valid basis.)

Building on her new “student needs” argument, Shaughnessy also argued that “some uniform set of criteria” was necessary to protect students from being sent into college level classes unprepared where they would be “doomed either to fail those courses or to be passed on without respect for their actual needs as students” (p. 2). [This argument was a more subtly worded version of Brenner’s claim that tests could somehow help students—although their conscious purpose was to fail and exclude many students to save CUNY money (Shaughnessy, 1975, October 27, p. 8). And it reflected the disdain for teacher assessment that Shaughnessy had shared with Volpe back in 1969, as she argued for data-driven efficiency in writing courses.]

Shaughnessy then listed six key principles for the new testing program: It was to be fair, realistic, efficient, evolving, effective, and should encourage university wide participation (p. 3). By “efficient,” she meant first that the new system should quickly replace individual campus placement and testing systems to avoid “any duplication.” Second, “it should wherever possible be integrated within the information gathering activities already in effect” (p. 3). Information gathering would ensure that information about compliance flowed up to the Chancellor’s office. This goal was clarified in Shaughnessy’s task Outline, number 7a: “Development of University
network to assure communication between Office of the Chancellor and field and to encourage productive attitudes toward testing program” (p. 7). By “effective,” she meant the program “should make it possible to determine whether criteria for minimal competency [were] in fact being applied at all campuses.” Where they were not applied, Shaughnessy called for “measures for assuring concurrence with the CUNY criteria” (p. 4).

In January of 1978, CUNY also announced an additional layer of punitive testing: it would implement rising-junior skills tests in “reading, mathematics and writing” that the incoming 1978 students would take beginning in 1980. CUNY dean Morton Rosenstock expected that the new requirement “will reduce the 50,000 students who enter the junior class each year, but…. [he] declined to estimate how many would be affected” (Fiske, 1978, January 18). (With this last component, CUNY would complete the test-centric “vertical integration” of basic skill enforcement that Shaughnessy had proposed in October of 1975. Rosenstock said the new tests would assure that students could “perform adequately in college-level courses” and he said CUNY hoped the exams would “have an effect on the colleges themselves” as they aligned their academic standards to meet the new assessments. The new layer of tests were “also intended to put pressure on the City’s schools,” signaling them to focus on “preparation in the basic skills” (Fiske, 1978, January 18). The same article also described the new CUNY incoming student testing program that would be required for 30,000 incoming students in the fall. Rosenstock explained that the Fall 1978 first-year student placement and exit writing tests would emphasize “correct grammar and sentence structure and general organization, not… content or style.” CUNY cited “the principal officials involved in developing the new minimum competency tests [as] Egon Brenner…and Mina Shaughnessy” (Fiske, 1978, January 18).
In March 1978, Shaughnessy was very sick as cancer spread through her body. But her in-house publications continued to shape the reception of the new testing system. Shaughnessy’s staff published much of her October 1977 rationale for the new testing program in a *Resource* “Special Issue on Testing” (Shaughnessy, 1978, March, pp. 1-4). Six of eight articles in the “evaluation” themed summer 1978 issue of her *Journal of Basic Writing* either praised high-stakes testing systems or explained how to create them.

**CUNY Launches its New Testing System (Fall 1978)**

CUNY fully implemented its high-stakes, first-year testing program in September of 1978, just two months before Shaughnessy lost her fight with cancer (CUNY, 1980, May 18; 1980, June 12). As summarized in Table Eleven, most CUNY students failed the tests and were placed into the remedial sub-tracks. While SEEK students had been exempted from many of the barriers to success that CUNY imposed on other students from 1975 to 1978, they were not exempted from the new testing system and it at once targeted them, exactly as Ballard, Shaughnessy, Meng, and the Queens SEEK teachers had all predicted, and exactly as the City College Proficiency Exam had targeted SEEK students there. CUNY’s SEEK students were over twice as likely to be placed into the new remedial tracks as other incoming four-year college students. Community college students also failed the new placement tests in droves, placing the vast majority of them into the new, remedial tracks. Virtually all College Discovery students were placed into the sub-tracks. CUNY was attempting to preserve its institutional reputation by labeling, stigmatizing and marginalizing the vast majority of its own students as deficient, remedial and basic. Courses designated as remedial had existed at CUNY for decades. Tiered sequences of courses designated as remedial had developed across the system as soon as it began to desegregate itself in the late 1960s. But this new system was different because it made
Table 11: Incoming First-Time First-Year CUNY Students Placed Into Remedial Courses Based on CUNY Minimum Skills Test Results (Fall 1978) (CUNY Office of Academic Affairs 5/19/80)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Senior College Students</th>
<th>Community College Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Regular Admits</td>
<td>SEEK Admits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Students</td>
<td>9,990</td>
<td>3,166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failed Writing Test (WAT)</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failed Math Test (MAT)</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failed Reading Test (RAT)</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

placement into those sub-tracks far more punitive. Students were forced to pass the very same tests they had just failed in order to exit remediation—or remain trapped in the sub-tiers until they flunked out or dropped out. The discouragement and defeat of students was not an unintended consequence of the system; rather it was the system’s conscious, original purpose—conceived when CUNY wanted to reduce enrollments by targeting its least valued students.

Having trapped many of its black, Latino, multi-lingual and poor students into this new sub-tier (including the vast majority of its SEEK and College Discovery students) the high-stakes exit tests kept them trapped. Table Twelve, based on CUNY’s 1980 press release, shows how many of the surviving four-year college students who were placed into the remedial track were
able to exit it within a year. (CUNY did not release any information about the students who gave up and dropped out within the first year.) The vast majority of the survivors were still trapped in remediation. Although the math exam was a bigger initial barrier, the writing exam was the most harmful exit barrier. After a year, only about one in five surviving students had escaped writing remediation. The SEEK students had lower success for all the tests—but the whole system harmed them far more because almost all SEEK students had been trapped into it by the placement tests. As one example, 72% of all Fall 1978 SEEK students were placed into the remedial writing track. A year later, only 21% of the survivors had passed the exit test that allowed them into mainstream courses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Community College Regular Admitted Students</th>
<th>Comm. College Project Discovery Students</th>
<th>Total Community College Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Failed Exit Test</td>
<td>Did Not Retest</td>
<td>Passed Exit Test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even more students remained trapped in the punitive sub-tracks within the community colleges, as shown in Table Thirteen. No more than 18% of any group of survivors passed any of the exit tests within a year. (CUNY’s weighted averages showed almost no impact by the College Discovery survivors—suggesting very few of them survived at all.) In all, the vast majority of CUNY’s entering community college students—attempting a two-year course of study—had failed to enter mainstream coursework after an entire year.
The same high-stakes testing system that CUNY launched in 1978 is still in place today. There have been tweaks and new test instruments from time to time, but for the last thirty-five years, writing, reading and math exam cut-scores have governed course placement, advancement, retention and (since 2000) admission for about 1.5 million first-time CUNY freshmen. Around half of these 1.5 million students have been labeled, stigmatized and marginalized as “basic writers” and placed into tens of thousands of basic writing courses where they have been required to pass more high-stakes timed writing exams or fail and repeat each course.86

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86 First time freshman totals are compiled from the CUNY Office of Institutional Research Data Books and Admissions Reports. I have found only limited CUNY writing test pass rate information. In the fall of 1978, 54% of CUNY’s 32,300 first-time freshmen failed the writing placement exam. (Lederman, 25 June 80, Table One). From 1991 to 1997, over 62% of all CUNY fall-semester, first-time freshmen failed the writing test (CUNY Data Books 1991-1997).
Chapter 17

The Tragedy of CUNY’s Myopia and Shaughnessy’s Testing System

The struggle for racial justice at CUNY from 1964 to 1978 quickly developed into two intertwined struggles that had very different results. The first struggle was over unjust and exclusionary admissions standards, and it produced a great victory. CUNY’s virtually all-white student body in 1964 was fully integrated fourteen years later. The second struggle was over instructional and assessment standards. This struggle ended in tragic defeat in 1978 when CUNY launched its massive new high-stakes minimum skills testing system.

In 1964, CUNY existed within the larger culture racial exclusion within American higher education. Many colleges professed liberal values. But they relied on admissions standards (high SAT scores and high school GPAs) to reinforce their superior self-images and to exclude the vast majority of black and brown applicants. Two decades earlier, Myrdal had argued that the “American dilemma” which perpetuated its racism was always grounded in a false sense of white superiority that undermined egalitarian ideals and encouraged forms of convenient white myopia that preserved biases and defended privileges. Kenneth and Mamie Clark’s research and work with black children across America, and especially within Harlem, revealed how quickly and painfully these children internalized messages that they were inferior. These messages were reinforced in New York City’s often deeply segregated, unequal, failed public schools. In 1954, the unanimous Supreme Court in Brown recognized that feelings of inferiority inflicted on black children by segregated schools could “affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone” (1954, p. 494). In 1956, Martin Luther King warned a New York audience about “the hidden and subtle forms” of Northern segregation. King imagined the pain suffered by children...
who faced education systems that told them: “You are not equal to, you do not belong; you cannot be” (1956, December 15, p 474).

In 1964, many City College professors cherished the myth that City admitted only the best and brightest students; that myth enhanced the reputation of the college and its faculty. But CUNY’s racial exclusion within an increasingly black and brown city became too obvious to ignore. In particular, City College seemed like a white colony amidst the black and brown communities of northern Manhattan. In 1963 and 1964, a chorus of voices began to demand justice in access to CUNY, including Albany politicians, community leaders, *The Amsterdam News*, Bowker, Gallagher, Davis, Levy, Ballard and Berger.

The key to successful racial integration of CUNY’s four-year colleges was the 1965 launch and the 1966 to 1969 expansion of City College’s SEEK program. SEEK was led and theorized by Berger and Ballard, who directly challenged CUNY’s reliance on traditional admissions standards as biased and invalid. They argued instead that students could only demonstrate their true college potential by attempting actual college coursework within a supportive environment that ameliorated the pain and damage of the wounds they carried into college with them. SEEK’s counselors, teachers and administrators carefully monitored each student’s success. Within this environment, teachers expected their students to succeed and questioned their own teaching practices when students failed to learn. SEEK trusted and relied on teachers to develop flexible, bottom-up pedagogies that responded to individualized student needs.

To doubters, SEEK tested whether poor black and Latino students were educable at the college level. However, Berger always conceived the program as testing the validity of college admissions systems. As a bridge program to the mainstream college, SEEK assessed itself by a
The single principle: did its students actually succeed? SEEK monitored and reported retention rates, credits earned, student grades, and ultimately, graduation rates. Close to 40% of the first three SEEK City College classes graduated, although none held the admissions credentials that many deemed necessary for success. Even a skeptic like Volpe found this evidence damning, forcing him to admit that CUNY’s admissions standards had merely perpetuated “a caste system” based on “social and economic background” (1972, p. 767).

Many successful pilot programs cannot replicate themselves. But Ballard and Berger’s SEEK model was both scalable and replicable: SEEK programs soon succeeded at colleges across both CUNY and SUNY, enrolling tens of thousands of students and disproving assumptions that those students had less potential than any others. SEEK programs have now supported students at CUNY for over 50 years; EOP programs modeled on City College’s SEEK program have supported SUNY students for 49 years; and other EOP programs directly inspired by SEEK have supported students across New York State for 47 years. Much has changed over five decades, but there are remarkable parallels among the SEEK students. In 1966, Marvina White struggled to resist and exceed her parents’ limited expectations for her and became the first woman in her family to attend and graduate from college; fifty years later, Orubba Almansouri struggled to resist and exceed similar expectations within her family to become City College’s Salutatorian.

The second struggle for racial justice at CUNY was over instructional and assessment standards. This struggle was harder for many to see because it turned on many large and small questions of administrative structures, institutional expectations, funding, teaching and assessments. But underneath those surface issues, the same old assumptions of superiority and inferiority guided this struggle too. Did educators value and believe in black and brown students
or did they doubt their potential and abilities, or even see them as uneducable? The believers began to dive in, meet students wherever they were, and guide them toward academic success. The doubters began to erect new gateways to slow, block or prevent student success and to guard their college towers from these unwanted intruders. A central site of this struggle was within writing instruction at City College as the SEEK program expanded from 1965 to 1969.

In the early 1960s, City College’s writing pedagogy, like that at many colleges, was shallow and formalist. Kriegel could not explain his pedagogy as an early 1960s City College writing teacher and was unsure whether his courses helped students in any way. But during its first 70 years, City’s rhetoric and composition pedagogy had been much broader and deeper. City required regular written and oral composing and performing from all its students across all years of college. This composing and performance was shaped by courses in grammar, logic and rhetoric. For a while, City resisted national trends that limited composing to a few courses and reduced the content of those courses from rhetoric to style, and then from style into sentence correctness. But by 1920 it had done both: writing instruction was limited to two first-year courses that focused on sentence mechanics. This pedagogy drifted along for 45 years, focusing on correctness and clarity within simple modes of writing that merely narrated, described or explained.

In the late 1960s, City’s writing pedagogy was pulled in two opposing directions. Some faculty, doubting their new students, focused on enforcing sentence-correctness using grammar workbooks, timed writing exercises, and high-stakes grammar exams, or simply avoiding teaching writing courses completely. The English Department had a long history as an egalitarian group of teacher/scholars who shared teaching the required writing courses that were the bulk of the departmental work. But beginning in 1965, led by Volpe, the department reduced required
courses, increased electives and hired more temporary lecturers, all of which enabled tenure rank faculty to avoid teaching writing courses as the college desegregated itself. Volpe assumed control over SEEK’s new English program, but he assigned “special” lecturers to teach SEEK courses and segregated them from the mainstream department. But some faculty developed new approaches like Mirsky’s “voice” pilot. Some tenured teachers volunteered to teach SEEK writing courses. When Volpe called for a discussion of writing courses in mid-1968, the entire department faculty responses constituted a sophisticated (and conflicted) conversation about writing pedagogy.

Starting in 1965, the first wave of SEEK English teachers, starting with Penale and Bambara, embraced SEEK’s philosophy. They encouraged their students to “write, write, write.” They met together and discussed their teaching. They taught in collaboration, but used individual approaches and set their own teaching goals. When students did not succeed, they questioned their own teaching and made adjustments. Bambara called her pedagogy “two-way learning.” Christian also taught in conversation with her students, drawing out their ideas and experiences. Mayes taught grammar at first, but soon saw it was ineffective; she studied the Iowa model and began to develop more sophisticated process and collaborative pedagogies. The first-year SEEK writing courses included ambitious reading lists, challenging discussions, and substantial, varied writing assignments. These teachers believed in their students, built their confidence, and challenged them to tackle difficult work and complex ideas. They rejected departmental final exams that would have harmed their students. Bambara, Christian, Gayle, and others fought racism within the English department and the college.

But the English chairs, Volpe and then Gross, doubted the SEEK students. No matter how sophisticated and demanding the SEEK teachers made their stretched writing courses,
Volpe deemed all SEEK courses to be remedial. In 1967, Volpe hired Shaughnessy as his new SEEK coordinator. She quickly launched regressive “innovations” that began to restore and enforce City’s errors pedagogy. In 1969, Volpe defined a new “basic writing” course at City College to mean a remedial, basic skills course. Shaughnessy gradually converted SEEK’s stretch-course model into a tiered sequence of “basic writing” courses that focused on diagnosing, tracking and reducing sentence errors. Within three years of her arrival, Volpe and Gross promoted Shaughnessy to assistant professor and assistant department chair in charge of composition courses.

In the first years of open admissions, many colleges embraced SEEK’s philosophy and parts of its teaching models. Bowker promoted Berger and Ballard to be University deans and in 1969 he tasked them (and CUNY’s new Vice Chancellor Healy) to guide CUNY’s colleges to develop supportive systems modeled on SEEK. In 1969, Healy wrote that SEEK was both the practical and theoretical model for open admissions. He cited the success of SEEK as proof to skeptical community leaders that the newly expanded CUNY would not become a revolving door that further victimized already wounded black and Latino students.

Across CUNY, writing teachers began diving in. Brooklyn College, Queens College, and Staten Island Community College all launched very different, yet exciting and complex, new writing programs. Other writing programs began with basic skills approaches but some teachers soon found them ineffective and began to research and implement deeper, more successful pedagogies.

Even as exciting new writing pedagogies were developing across CUNY, Shaughnessy reshaped her City College Basic Writing program to focus on efficient delivery of direct grammar instruction and the measurement of student grammar errors. She accepted the
department’s new writing Proficiency Exam as a “check” on her writing program. In late 1972, she fully validated and endorsed the Proficiency Exam, forcing writing teachers to align their courses with it. In 1971 and 1972, Shaughnessy accepted the Proficiency Exam as a basic writing final exam and mandated other mid-term and final exams in her writing courses. She required new detailed grammar reports for each student. It soon became clear that many basic writing course students would fail the Proficiency Exam or refuse to take it at all. But Shaughnessy validated and endorsed the exam in November of 1972.

From 1968 to 1977, Shaughnessy’s true values and agenda were hard to discern because her messages in public writings and speeches to writing teachers differed starkly from her private writings to administrators. In 1968, Shaughnessy publically mocked the new Proficiency Exam as “attic furniture” (1968, Summer). But in a private memo to Volpe, she cited the exam as a positive step toward her goal of using objective and businesslike measurements of student writing that would improve the teacher assessments that Shaughnessy derided as unreliable “feelings” (1969, November 30). A year later, Shaughnessy, although conflicted, promised Gross she would develop a writing program that efficiently delivered grammar instruction and focused on the “A, B, Cs of correctness” before anything else (1970, December 10). A few months later, Shaughnessy repurposed much of the Gross memo to write a newsletter essay in which she argued against teaching the very same “A, B, Cs of correctness” (1971, March).

Shaughnessy quickly consolidated remarkable power at City College. In 1971, she effectively reinstated mainstream first-year composition courses at City College by recalibrating placement test cut-scores to place virtually all incoming students into her writing courses and then defying the college to overrule her judgment. She also fulfilled her promise to Gross. Her regressive innovations, new administrative requirements and increased uses of timed writing
tests gradually overwhelmed teacher resistance to her tiered course-model and sentence-error pedagogy. Student failure rates in basic writing courses climbed, especially among SEEK students. Shaughnessy left the program to become a full-time researcher in the Spring of 1972, beginning her study of errors in 4,000 placement exams that would eventually become her widely read *Errors & Expectations*.

In a 1973 speech to writing teachers, Shaughnessy warned against falling prey to “the net of numbers” and offering validation to questionable assessments. But only a few months earlier, in a memo to a City College committee, she endorsed the Proficiency Exam as a completely valid measure of her program and its students. After Shaughnessy endorsed the exam, in 1973 and 1974, it inflicted obvious harm on basic writing students, especially on SEEK students, as writing teachers aligned their course with the exam. Despite efforts to teach to the test, students increasingly either failed the Proficiency Exam or refused to take it. In early 1973, Shaughnessy used a competing offer from Hunter to negotiate a double raise and promotion at City College. But she did not return to administer City’s writing program. Instead she sought a deanship. In 1974, with help from both Ballard and Berger, Shaughnessy won a new CUNY dean’s position created by Berger. Beginning in March of 1975, Dean Shaughnessy’s portfolio included placement tests. But she immediately assumed responsibility for all basic skills testing across CUNY.

In 1975, CUNY’s Board and chancellor became locked in a dispute with New York City and Albany politicians over CUNY’s free tuition policy. Albany had advocated imposing tuition since the 1960 Heald report. Now the City faced a budget crisis and City politicians also began to demand tuition at CUNY. Chancellor Kibbee and CUNY’s Board dismantled their own university and denigrated their own students in order to save free tuition. In particular, Kibbee
searched for ways to cut costs by excluding or expelling students with low test scores. In October 1975, Shaughnessy conceived a “vertical integration” testing system with the City’s schools, including “sharpened… testing” to drop some CUNY students to save money, all administered by a new CUNY testing unit.

Although Kibbee had proposed admissions tests in reading and mathematics, Shaughnessy’s vision was very different. Ballard, Berger and Healy all offered proposals to reduce remediation and tighten standards, but none included a massive new testing system or testing unit within CUNY, or layers of vertically integrated testing. Of course many educators advocated new testing systems across CUNY from 1964 to 1977. Had Shaughnessy’s been a lone voice, if her proposals did not resonate with her bosses, she could not have pressed her ideas and as a sophisticated rhetor, she might not have tried. While I have only fragments of the private memos and conversations that circulated among CUNY’s deans and chancellors, these fragments demonstrate that the massive testing system that emerged in 1977 and launched in 1978 was in several ways uniquely Shaughnessy’s own testing system, starting with her October 1975 proposal to her bosses.

Shaughnessy submitted two other reports that clarified her belief in a CUNY-wide testing system and her actions to promote it. She was on the divided task force that urged in its majority report for a “selective retention” policy over a “selective admissions” policy (CUNY, 1976, April 2). Three days later, Shaughnessy issued her own IRC report which detailed her actions to develop, study and promote testing across CUNY over the previous year. There, she warned administrators that a new testing system would be “deeply, pervasively controversial on several grounds” and urged the Board and campus “policy makers” to use a firm implementing hand” to overcome resistance (p. 7).
While Shaughnessy was taking all these actions at CUNY, she traveled to San Francisco and gave her inspirational “Diving In” speech, where she mocked writing teachers who doubted their students, became mere sentence mechanics, and guarded the towers of their colleges against their own students. At the same time, her own deeply troubled Basic Writing program at City College collapsed into complete failure.

In June of 1976, the Board was forced to impose tuition anyway. Four-year college admissions plummeted by half; the overall undergraduate enrollment shrank by 40,000 students in a single year. All the CUNY Central testing proposals in 1975 and early 1976 were rationalized as necessary to save remediation costs by excluding or expelling struggling students. Yet the chancellors and deans had mixed motives. After they were forced to impose tuition, CUNY struggled to enroll as many students as possible; yet they continued to pursue a new punitive testing system that they knew would target non-white students.

When a Senate Faculty Committee first met in September 1976 to consider the Board’s call for new “proficiency standards” for rising juniors, Shaughnessy was already busy assembling task forces and documentation to steer their discussions. She met with the committee, supplied it with materials, coached her colleagues about testing issues, and induced CUNY composition teachers to assist her—telling them that resistance to the testing system was fruitless. She also used her IRC newsletter and Journal of Basic Writing to promote grammar instruction and proficiency testing (1978, March).

Ballard, Meng and Lavin all told Kibbee the new tests would target minority students. Shaughnessy knew it herself. In a memo to Murphy in December of 1976, Shaughnessy recognized that the “penalized testing” system they were planning would eliminate black and
Latino students in a way that would strike many as a “desperate and educationally irresponsible move” (Shaughnessy, 1976, December 5, p. 3).

Yet she continued to push ahead. With almost no consultation outside of CUNY Central, the rising junior testing system was recast in early 1977 as a new zero-credit, remedial sub-tier for incoming students. There was no public debate or new Board vote. There was no meaningful opportunity for the university’s composition community to oppose the new system. And by mid-1977, everyone knew that Shaughnessy was fighting cancer—making any opposition to her new system very difficult. Again Shaughnessy defended the testing system as necessary. Borrowing from her October 1975 memo, she labeled the new testing system in a memo to Brenner and Kibbee as ending “the first stage” of Open Admissions and beginning a new stage that enforced “a uniform set of criteria” (Shaughnessy, 1977, October 3, pp. 1-2).

Shaughnessy’s testing system launched across CUNY in the Fall of 1978 as she lost her final struggle against cancer. Whatever her inspirational legacies may be elsewhere, this testing system is her legacy here at CUNY. It remains in place 38 years after her death. Many hands built CUNY’s testing system in ways large and small—but in the end the testing system realized Shaughnessy’s vision. Incoming students were ranked and placed into the sub-tiers by tests in reading, writing and mathematics that counted their errors and quantified their deficiencies. Students could only exit these sub-tiers by passing more high-stakes exit exams. Strangers graded the writing exams; teachers’ assessments, which Shaughnessy had derided in 1969 as mere unreliable feelings, carried no weight.

In Shaughnessy’s testing system, all students were admitted, but most were labeled as too basic to begin college-level work. The sub-tier courses effectively discouraged and winnowed out those students who needed the most support—exactly the use of testing that Shaughnessy
proposed in October 1975 and the “selective retention” admission plan her task force recommended in April 1976. Shaughnessy herself designed the new CUNY Central testing unit that she had first proposed in October 1975. Her vertical integration idea was largely implemented through the heavily tested new sub-tiers. But CUNY soon completed her vision of test-driven, vertical integration when it added a new rising junior writing test, also administered by CUNY Central’s new testing unit. All writing instruction across CUNY would be deeply shaped for decades by these tests’ relentless demands for direct focus on sentence correctness. Shaughnessy’s A, B, C’s of correctness had become required pedagogy across the entire CUNY system.

Due to their “washback” effects on teachers and teaching, as well as their devastating consequences to students, we can view high-stakes testing systems as developing their own forms of agency. Rather than believe in students, empower teachers and promote student success, Shaughnessy’s testing system doubted, discouraged and defeated undervalued students. It replaced SEEK’s bottom-up pedagogy with the ultimate top-down assessment model—a giant, high-stakes, fixed system that would remain in place for decades, overruling teachers and ignoring its devastating harm to students. Shaughnessy’s testing system did not respect and value students as individuals; it did not gauge their progress or effort; it did not discern the wounds of racism or poverty. Instead, the testing system blamed and punished the victims for the wounds inflicted on them. As Martin Luther King said of segregation in his 1956 Manhattan speech, it depersonalized each student “into merely a thing to be used, not a person to be respected” and reduced each student “into a depersonalized cog in a vast economic machine” (1956, December 15, p. 474).
Taken at her word, Shaughnessy believed the testing system was not inevitable. (Shaughnessy told the chancellors and other deans so in April of 1976.) She could have opposed the testing system, as Penale, Christian, Bambara, Gayle, Mayes and the other SEEK teachers opposed high-stakes writing tests at City College before she got there, and as Bruffee opposed grammar pedagogy and writing tests for five years at Brooklyn. Shaughnessy could have rallied CUNY’s writing teachers against any new testing system and fought to protect CUNY’s students from the harm she knew the tests would cause. But she chose to guard the towers and to ignore the resulting harm to students (especially SEEK students) and writing teachers. Rather than oppose the new CUNY-wide testing system, Shaughnessy chose to play a pivotal role (arguably the pivotal role) in its conception, development, design, promotion, validation, and promulgation.

Writing teachers, almost without exception, are idealists. Shaughnessy captured our idealism perfectly in her 1975 “Diving In” speech, where she embraced the simple, central truth that teaching excellence in college writing classrooms always grows directly from the complex interaction among teachers and students. Excellent teaching is hard to attain or even to define—but it always starts, Shaughnessy told us, by meeting students where they are and recognizing the excellence and capacities they bring into the classroom with them. Excellence never comes from assuming students are empty or broken vessels or from deficit models of teaching that count errors or that label adults as underdeveloped children who are unable to tackle serious intellectual and creative challenges. Moreover, Shaughnessy warned that guarding the tower is never about helping students. When we lack faith in our own students and guard the towers against them, our classrooms become “a peculiar and demoralizing contest for both student and teacher, since neither expects to win” (1976, p. 235).
Shaughnessy was a genuinely caring teacher and mentor, a feminist pioneer, a brilliant, charismatic leader and speaker, and a subtle, nuanced writer. But as she rose quickly through CUNY’s ranks from lecturer to University dean in only five years, she left behind a deeply troubled Basic Writing program that soon found itself in utter ruins. Although Shaughnessy was a leader of CUNY’s writing teachers, she sacrificed them to timed, high-stakes writing tests, first at City College, then at other CUNY colleges, and ultimately throughout the entire university system. Over the 38 years since her death, Shaughnessy’s testing system has forced tens of thousands of idealistic basic writing teachers at CUNY to become the very tower guards she warned us against in her 1975 speech. Many of us have been forced to teach grammar drills and pointless timed, five-paragraph essays, only to watch half our students fail the high-stakes exit tests anyway.

Marvina White graduated in 1970 and went on to become a lifelong writing teacher at City College, Princeton and Stanford. When White remembers her first college class fifty years ago—that summer SEEK writing class with Barbara Christian— her eyes light up and she recalls the classroom as though it was yesterday. Reaching college was a long awaited moment of victory, an entry into a sophisticated new world of reading, discussion and ideas. Christian’s course was everything White had dreamed college would be.

Like White, all entering students bring their dreams and expectations with them when they enter college. But since 1978, close to a million incoming CUNY students have had a very different experience from White. They have found themselves labeled as basic and trapped into CUNY’s punitive sub-tiers. Tens of thousands of CUNY writing teachers have spent entire careers watching helplessly as half or more of these already wounded, stigmatized and discouraged students have been further wounded, stigmatized and discouraged by failing more
mandatory high-stakes tests—forcing them to either try over again, or give up and slip away. For 38 years now this system has told almost a million CUNY students: “You are not equal to, you do not belong; you cannot be.”
Allen B. Ballard: An Oral History of the CCNY 1960's SEEK Program

In 1965, City College launched it’s “Pre-Bac” program by admitting and supporting 113 poor and working class students who did not qualify under CCNY’s traditional standards. (Levy, 1965)

Pre-Bac was a huge success. After one year, 72% of its students were still studying at CCNY.

Over half had a “C” average or higher. (Berger, 1966 3).

Renamed “SEEK” in 1966, the program got even better: 85% of the new Fall 1966 and Fall 1967 students were still studying at CCNY after one year. (Berger 1969 Table 40).

Close to 40% of these 1965-67 SEEK students would graduate from City College by 1972. (Frost 1972 1).

SEEK proved that students who had been labeled as inadequate could successfully compete in an elite college.

By 1970, CCNY’s SEEK Program had become a direct model for new Educational Opportunity Programs at dozens of CUNY, SUNY and New York private colleges.

Over the last 50 years, these EOPs have admitted to college and supported hundreds of thousands of undervalued students.

Part I

How Did It Begin?

Yeah, okay, I started teaching at City College in 1961; and you know it was really a very good situation. I was—enjoyable department, great political science department, wonderful colleagues, I’m a young, I, a young little professor coming in, assistant professor. [0:01:51] The one disturbing thing was the fact that at the college, uh, during my first few years, I taught maybe one or two black students out of the total students that I taught, maybe a thousand students—two of them black, two or three of them. I could remember them by name. And that bothered me.

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You know, well, City College itself was in the center of Harlem. And I think as I pointed out City College was in the center of Harlem. So it was basically a white enclave in the midst of a whole black population and on the West side of a Hispanic population, Puerto Ricans, because that was Puerto Rican territory over there at the time. So, yes. It was, it was a, it was, and black
writers and I talked about this: John Williams and Baldwin, James, Baldwin and John Williams, and even some other writers had always talked about this hill—this citadel on the hill, this place that was away from the community and it was almost like a colony had been placed there, a white colony. And that really had to change, that’s the way, you know, historical things are. The contradiction was just too intense in the midst of the kind of revolution that was really taking place in the country, in the whole civil rights realm.

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I’d grown up in a segregated Philadelphia school, elementary school. There were many impoverished kids. And in my class we lost a lot of them to tuberculosis; they just plain died. [0:04:01] I can’t remember their names now, I don’t want to, but they just died. One kid came to school just coughing blood one day. I remember Billy was his name; he was coughing blood, and they let him keep coming. He had TB. So, these students—I was a middle class kid, but the school was mainly, I think, poor kids. These kids, some of them who died, were smarter than I was.

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Well, these things were with me: here I am, a young professor at City College. So, I was disturbed and I went to see an older black colleague of mine who was on the faculty, at the same faculty of political science at CCNY. Name was John Davis. He had been, along with Ken Clark, I don’t remember which one came first, I think it was actually John Davis. He was one of the very first Black professors in the City University and at City College. He had taught at Lincoln, he actually knew my uncle from Lincoln. My uncle was a great basketball star at Lincoln; he knew my uncle. And I went to him and asked him, you know, what I should do, I asked, I said I wanted to do something about the situation, maybe set up some kind of a program that would bring African American students into, into the college. So I ran by the idea past him. And John was a great man, he said “Well, why don’t you go ahead and take it to the president?” I was a little scared….

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The president—the president’s name was Buell Gallagher. [0:05:56] He had been the president of Talladega, and the much praised president of Talladega College in the South. And he was, he had come to City College, you know, which was a pioneer in education, uh ,to, you know, become an urban educator. So, here you have this president who had been in the South, and taught—been the president of an all Black college, which was a very great school incidentally, Talladega. And he had come North. But he is teaching, he’s the president of all white school. He was liberal. I went to him, over to his home actually, not his office, but his home there. He had tea and I think his wife brought something in there, some kind of cookies or whatever, you know. So, and he asked me what was it about and I told him what my idea was to set up some kind of program to bring African American students into the college one way or another. He said to me that that was a very good idea.

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So, he said, “Well you go ahead, write it up and then take it to the dean and we’ll go from there” because it’s chain of command. So, that’s what I did. I wrote up the program and took it to Dean Frodin and Dean Frodin then presented it to the faculty council, ah, faculty senate there. The faculty senate, uh, you know, debated the program, brought up questions of standards in particular, and, uh, standards because they didn’t want the reputation of the school to drop; they didn’t want their standards of excellence to drop. [0:08:05] Now, it’s important to know what the environment of the City College was. City College was a bastion of excellence. There were outstanding professors there. The alumni from this—of this tuition-free City College had gone on to great, distinguished careers – Dan Bell at Harvard, right? Historians, like Salk, you know, you name them. They had Nobel Prize winners come from CCNY. And, justly so, they didn’t want that reputation to change, be sullied. But here they were in the middle of Harlem. And as I said, you know, and it was a time in the civil rights era; so this program that I, you know, basically wrote up, found a hospitable kind of reception on the part of the faculty—but with this hesitation, you know, because—about standards and about not letting those standards go down. At the very outset at that faculty meeting, right—which I was told to be quiet at I think, right [laughing] I… they… there was: “Well what about this? What about that?” Now, let me say again that these professors were tops in their field. CCNY excelled, great scholars all around that place—great physicists, great mathematicians, etc. So in any case it passed. [0:10:10]

Part II

Who Shaped the Program?

And the president, you know, you know, and the deans, right? They decided that the program would go on but it would be—that I would be a part of a committee that would institute and create and organize the program. The administrative home of it was the School of General Studies, the evening school. Yeah, it was at the time under Dean Levy, and, uh, Dean Levy, right? And Dean Levy had an assistant dean, Leslie Berger. It was decided that the administrative direction of the program would be under him.

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Yeah, Les Berger was a survivor of the Hungarian Holocaust. He was a very, very dedicated person. I don’t think he saw color at all. I think that the concentration camp experience had marked him and made him totally attuned to the need for treating each and every human being with dignity. He was a remarkable man.

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[0:12:00] Yeah, right and Dr. Berger—he was, he always had these students in his office; they were constantly in his office talking with him. He was tireless in his work ethic. He lived and breathed the SEEK program. Uh, and was a strong, strong defender of the program both budget-wise, and, uh, every other way that you can imagine. He was—take trips up to Albany to lobby for money, take the students up there with him. We’d contact those black legislators up there, we’d have little hearings and things like that, would visit with the students and stuff, and they’d have little hearings where, at which they’d present the students. And Les was behind and all that.
He had a good political flair too. So, he, he was remarkable. He started, you know, basically kind of implanted that program—made, put it on solid ground, no question about it.

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The SEEK program itself was named by Les Berger, who was very proud of his, his naming of the program. What Les did, he said “Let’s call it the SEEK program.” He was very good about that—“Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge,” that’s what it was. And it was, he was so proud—he kept going around telling everybody, “Well guess what, guess what?” Yeah, well, he did it, all right, so….

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Under Dean Levy’s successor, Dean Schwartz, right, a triumvirate or quartet actually, of folks was put together to implement this program. Who were they? [0:14:00] It was Dean Berger; it was Bernie, Dean Bernie Sohmer from the Math Department; Abe Schwartz, who was the overall dean; and myself. We were all together a working committee and we went through all of the mechanisms of creating this department.

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Abe Schwartz was one of the most humane people I’ve ever met. I mean he was, um, as I said he was a gentle soul, quiet, perceptive, always almost Solomon-like in his approach to, to choices about students, always weighing this against that and always trying to be just. I have never seen—he should have been a judge.

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Bernie Sohmer was this, you know, a soul mate. Bernie was always there, always supportive of the program, uh, went out of his way to do whatever he had to do to see to it that the program was going to be a success, you know. And don’t, everything, you want to have this done, that done—forget it, Bernie would take care of it. So, as I said we all worked together very well. And I can’t ever remember a moment of discord amongst, you know, Bernie or Abe Schwartz and, or Leslie Berger; we just worked together as a team. [0:16:02]

Part III

How Did you Choose SEEK students?

But basically, we wanted to break loose from the traditional standards, okay? We wanted to break loose from them. Ah, basically it was—the program was situated around Harlem, in other words, it was the Upper West Side, including Harlem—that’s where the pool from which we took students. We had relationships with the high schools in those areas; we got recommendations from the high school counselors; we had written statements from the students; and we then chose what students we were going to interview, because we didn’t interview everybody. But then we interviewed students and out of all these students, none of them who had
a, a grade point average that would have gotten them into City College in the first place, we selected the first class of incoming, what we called “Pre-Bac” students.

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It’s very obvious, we didn’t believe—Les, even more so than me—ah, ah, let me put it this way: in terms of standards and SAT scores and things of this sort, we did not basically believe that the SAT measured all of the potential of a kid; but we felt that, let’s see how that student performed in the high school relative to their peers, and how would we get an upward trajectory? [0:18:00]

Now, Les was prepared to go further down than I was. I had been more of a—I was more of a—how can I put it? I was more academically kind of oriented; he was a psychologist, okay? And I’m more of a political scientist. And so, I’m more about the classroom and he's more about the, you know, the whole body or the mind of the student, I am about this—And I had taught, I had, you know, a certain level: if a C student is a C student, if a C student is a C student—he is going to be a C student forever. I want to see, right, that there’s been some movement on the part of that student. You go way down at a certain point, right, you are going to find, you know, sparkles down in there. But basically, I want some kind of level of competence. I want some, some kind of level that, assurance that somewhere along the way you have sat down and you have started looking at a book and reading the book all the way through and doing all the homework and doing all this—I want to see and I want to see somewhere that you sparkled, right?

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We would often argue about, when we would be sitting down going over students records—he would be on one side and I would be on the other, me and Bernie would be on the other side, Bernie Sohmer. Because Les was prepared to take more of a risk, academic risk, on a student than I was and I think than Bernie was. [0:19:59]

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I’d be teaching a class in Soviet politics. And I was—man, I’m a specialist in Soviet politics, right? And I have kids coming into that classroom who have read the works of Trotsky back and forth and would argue with me about Trotsky and Stalinism, right? And have me on my heels a little bit, okay? I mean, this is the level of work at City College. So, these students were going to be tossed into that kind of competition and I wanted to have some sense [0:20:42] in my mind that they could succeed. So you had to see somewhere that they are willing to learn, willing to study, right? And that somewhere along you can see—boom—some spark in them.

Part IV

How Did SEEK Work?

So, ah, we set about working on these guidelines. I had set up the basic guidelines in my proposal itself that the faculty senate had, had approved; we just set about implementing everything. How did we do it, right?
We jointly decided—we were not only, we were an intake committee, we were also a personnel committee. We decided on the new faculty that we would bring in to teach in the program, on the counseling staff that we would bring into the department. All of us jointly interviewed all of these people.

And then we brought in, Les brought in, some counselors who were psychological clinical psychologists basically—they became the basis for our, our kind of counseling component of the program. [0:22:05]

We brought in—I brought in, well later on I brought in, we set up a reading component to the program. Later on, Audrey Lorde was going to come in and she taught there. And we set up a social science component and a math component to the program.

And we set up a mini-college. And a lot of folks at the same time we were creating this mini-college, they said that-- some people said again in the faculty, said “Hey, no, what are you going to be doing setting up a separate college within a college?” It’s always funny how you have these tensions between, ah, integration and segregation. Yeah, you have got to segregate in order to get the kids ready. Because our aim—our aim was to take students who were not qualified under traditional standards for City College, bring em into the college, right? Put them through a lower-paced program, a program were they basically would not go into, be thrown immediately into the actual school curriculum, but would gradually be merged into the general academic population after they had been prepared at a certain level to enter those regular classrooms. That was our aim, that's what we were after, yeah.

Yeah we stretched out stuff. What we did in, in creating the courses was—there were two kinds of courses. One, in the English courses were— every course, what we did was to stretch out time. In other words, we want to give you, in the pre-baccalaureate courses, [0:24:01] we want to give you as much kind of—we want to cut the course content down, we want to, what you would have in a regular course, we want to teach you academic skills, take you-- how you take notes right?-- how you prepare for examinations, how you read—because everything in life is reading. You have to get over material. So, we want you to discipline yourself, become scholars, young scholars, that was the aim. So, we would try to give them content but content stretched out over time.

I actually created myself the social science component of that and I would teach them, you know, about various topics. My specialty was Russian politics and I would teach them—give them
short mini-courses on the Soviet Union, on Karl Marx or with various other kinds of things. Ah, sometimes I would actually talk about the reconstruction. But we would have, you know, mini-courses, social science courses, where they would again learn the discipline, and, of learning—because that's what it was all about, you know? They are trying to just—change them.

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But, I love teaching and the teaching in the program was, you know, like anything else. I’m, I’m a very, how can I put it, uh, I’m very disciplined in my approach to the classroom. I want the kids to work hard and stuff.

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I think the kids enjoyed my classes. As I said, I would have mini-courses on the history of Soviet Union, or on, a mini-course on the reconstruction period, or a mini-course on—I’d break the course down into three segments really, right? And we would just go over them. [0:26:01] I’d lecture the way I would regularly would, the way I would actually lecture in a regular course. And then, after, I had grad assistants and these grad assistants would then kind of take the kids off for sections. And it was supposed to talk about, asks, asks the students what notes they had taken, what did the professor say, etc, etc. Did they understand Marx and did they understand Leninism and they understand the transition from—that's what I wanted to know.

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I think we had some credit, I guess, I don't remember. But I know there was a point of contention. On the students’ part, it was because they needed some incentive that they were, you know, they were progressing. On our part, it was, on the college’s part, they didn't want to give credit for, you know, remedial work. And that's still a problem today—I mean, you know that hasn't changed over 95 years or whatever.

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[27:01] We tried, it's amazing—the students began to love the whole fact of being in school and they began to see and to be self-motivated and to see the ways in which the traditional curriculum, traditional course offerings, could be used to enrich their lives, and to see that everything didn't always have to be about their own lives. In other words, you know that, a course in Greek history, can give you—is enjoyable in and of itself, in addition to being something that’s—a body of knowledge that’s going to give you a certain context to look at your own experience in. [0:28:00]

But there's a joy learning about Greek civilization in and of itself. It doesn't have to be African American history. So, the students did see—after a while you see this, how can I say it like?—this joy of learning coming into them, yeah.

Part V

How Did the English Program Work?
Yeah, particularly in writing—the writing is, was, as I’ve frequently said, the writing was the key
to the, ah, SEEK program. The writing program was the essence of it.

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Let me say this. Ed Volpe over in the English department said “Hey, I got two great English
teachers for you.” This was before Mina Shaughnessy came in. He said, “I’ve got two great
graduate students here who are going to do fine over in your, who are going to be just the folks
you are looking at—for….” One of them was Toni Cade, right? Toni Cade Bambara later on.
And the other was Addison Gayle. They were both getting their masters or just received their
Masters degree in English from the City College.

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And they were excellent. Tony; young, vital, you know, radical. Addison, you know, had been in
the Air Force. And Addison always had a pipe in his mouth, right? He wanted to be a scholar
man-- he said “I’m a scholar.” Addison, wherever he went, Addison has this scholarly pipe in his
mouth. And, ah -- but he was really good. They were both, let me say this, excellent teachers.
Addison, very great, despite being Afro-centric, starting his Afro-centrism, you know, the black
bureau of this, the black aesthetic and all that, despite all that black aesthetic, he was like your
proper English professor. [0:30:01] And Addison, you know, was really deep into the traditional
literary canon also, that's where he was. Toni, the same way, Toni Cade also—ah, very radical,
but also very, very well versed in English literature.…

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Barbara Christian was great. How can I say about Barbara, you know? She's from Virgin
Islands—pert, bright as a whip and very dedicated, all right? Uh, and very opinionated and she
was very radical, you know and—but in a very good way. I always thought that Barbara was
never, you know, gone off the board here, off the board there—she kept her eye on the ball pretty
much. And, ah, but she was a delightful person to be around, as was Toni Cade, you know? Ah,
Toni and Barbara were inseparable.

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There was I think a judicial, kind of judicious mix of discipline and spontaneity. We had great
teachers: uh, Mina Shaughnessy and, you know, some of the others I have spoken about earlier,
right? 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. [0:32:06]

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, they both worked it better, to 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. How can we better kind of do this so that, or create this kind of essay so that others are going to really see it and say: “Hey that’s something to look at, that’s a wonderful piece of writing that you just did.” Okay, how are you going to do that?

Part VI

Who Were These SEEK students?

[33:01]We had, well one my, one of the students who is obviously will ever stay in my mind is, ah, Louis Rivera. And Louis Rivera went on to become, to start this Newyorkrican Program in Brooklyn, you know, and became a very well known poet. And Louis, always arguing with me. That's what he'd do, he was always, he loved to argue with me about this, about that. He was older student and whatever my views were on something, he’d like to come into my office—I’m busy as I could be, and argue with me about this, arguing with me politically about this and about that. But Louis was like that to the end of his life, because I talked to him maybe a little before he died on the phone and he wanted to argue with me about some politics. [0:34:00] This was five years ago or something like that. He’s on the phone and he wants to argue with me.

We had, you know, Sekou Sundiata, this was really about Robert Feaster, he was one of those students then—and he was a basketball player. And I think—I think he was a nice kid, I mean he was really nice. I liked him a lot.

But he was very creative, ah he was creative—smart as a whip, as was Louis Rivera.

Ah, I think Louis was really, was loved by, by the English teachers—very creative and stuff like and they saw him—that but he was also, again, very radical. Louis was really, you know, deep into all these protests and kind of things; but respectful—let me put it that way, respectful all the time. Never—never, never less than being a gentleman.

So, he always had an angle but he was a very—became a very accomplished poet in spoken word, as did Feaster, because Feaster (Sekou Sundiata, right?) he and Rivera were really tight all, together all the time, right? I guess they just kind of fed each other intellectually, the way they
were. And then there was Iris Morales, a wonderful young woman, you know—bright and smart. She was one of the smartest students in that class; I mean she really, she really performed. She was Puerto Rican. She performed from the get-go. I mean, she just soared and that's the way, that’s the way she was. Ah, some of the other students—Marvina White was a wonderful, good student. She went on to teach writing at Princeton and I think finally at Stanford. [0:36:01] And then we had, ah, Francee Covington. Francee was kind of the light of the program. She was just full of life, wonderful young woman, vital and mind—you could always see her mind working well.

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These, these students really brought joy to all of us. The students themselves, right? And as we could see them progressing and as we could see how they were beginning to take advantages of all this—the great books and things that were around them and all the great kind of teachers that were around them, how, how—this made, brought a joy to us and kind of reinforced our belief that we were doing the right thing in doing the program. Uh-huh.

**Part VII**

**How Did SEEK Succeed?**

We succeeded in the program in the sense that we were able to graduate I think maybe somewhere around 35% of the entering class, of our first entering class. And that the students that we brought in, right? And that, who were basically, you know, went through our orientation process and went into the regular college—those students were able to achieve good averages. I am not saying great averages—some of them did, Iris Morales did—but good averages in the regular college, and in regular college courses. And that was, I think, the validation of our efforts. The students made us proud. [0:37:59] Ah, and the way—we would sit like, you know, sit around just waiting for, you know, for the semester to end, for the grade, for the, the grades to come in from the end of the semester, you know? Like somebody was waiting for a score from the World Cup or something. But we would be sitting around waiting and then we would come say “Oh, this is great! Oh its great!” And, of course, there was sometimes disappointment that came with, you know, some students who didn't perform very well.

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And so Arthur Ede was black speaker of the house here in the senate. I forgot now which. But Arthur became a great champion of the SEEK program. He saw the SEEK program, and he says; “Why don't you have it in the state university?”

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And so, and finally it's become something that is essential to the, the vitality of a college. You know, that's the way it is now. And, uh, I don't, you know, I don't take any personal kind of big-deal credit for all that, I mean.... But somebody would have seen sooner or later it was a contradiction. This is major contradiction between, you know, the way that white colleges were back then, and, you know, the changing aspirations of African-Americans and Hispanic folks
who were changing the dynamic of the country. So, something had to give and what gave was, you know, this, was the colleges—because basically they changed their standards, and in terms of what they admitted.

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Yeah I think the lasting legacies, I don't think— the lasting legacy of the program is that practically no college today, certainly no public institution, has—can exist without having some kind of intake program for minority students, right, who don’t meet their usual criteria. [0:40:16]

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It was a great time and I think that we all did, ah, put forth a valiant effort to, to change things and we did get something done—but it's like I said, right? Every revolution has a counter-revolution and every kind of revolutionary aspect has something to move back forth against it. You just watch Obama now, right? Big time revolution; and then, whoop, great big tea party, that's the way life is. So. You do your best.

***

Well, what we wanted were students who would go on out of our program, get into regular college and do what any regular college student does. Right? Some are going to go out and be great scholars, which some of them did. Some would go out and do other things. Others—some would go out and, ah, you know, just be ordinary good providers for their family. We wanted just to get the students—we had no control over what happened to them after we got out of the program. But for goodness sakes—please do good, get out of the program, move into the regular curriculum, and then make your life choices. So that's what we did. And that's what, that’s what our aim was.

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[41:57] So they are all – they, there was a good group to be around and, you know, I was very proud of what they have accomplished in life, really.

***

And as I have said over the years, I’ve gone in New York City, ah, we looked around and say “I went to CCNY.” “I went to Queens College.” SEEK students, SEEK students, SEEK students. We created a strong basis, I think, for the creation of a strong—of a black middle class in the City itself. We brought a lot of students in—I don't know the numbers right now, but there are a lot of numbers, but a lot of students came through those SEEK programs and have gone on to make good, viable lives for themselves and for their families. And ah, you know, that's a great blessing— it’s a great blessing that they were able to do that. You know? So, that's what success is about. [43:24]

Credits:

Allen B. Ballard: An Oral History of the CCNY 1960s SEEK Program
Special Thanks to Professor Allen B. Ballard

A Comp Comm Production, 2014.

Produced, Directed and Edited by Sean Molloy

“Put Love In” by Linda Draper (2013)
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Works Cited


Frost Olivia. Memorandum to Dean Robert Young et al., 19 Apr. 1972. Olivia Frost Papers, Box 10, Folder One, Research Collections at the Schomburg Center For Research In Black Culture. NYPL. TS.


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In 1965, City College Launched its “Pre-Bac” program by admitting and supporting 113 poor and working class students who did not qualify under CCNY’s traditional standards. (Levy 1965).

Pre-Bac was a huge success. After one year, 72% of its students were still studying at CCNY. Over half had a “C” average or higher. (Berger 1966 3).

Renamed “SEEK” in 1966, the program got even better: 85% of the new Fall 1966 and Fall 1967 SEEK students were still studying at CCNY after one year. (Berger 1969 Table 40).

SEEK proved that students who had been labeled as inadequate could successfully compete in an elite college. Close to 40% of the 1965-67 SEEK students would graduate from City College by 1972. (Frost 1972 1).

One of those graduates was Marvina White.

Marvina went on to teach college writing at CCNY, Princeton University and Stanford University for 33 years. She directed the Princeton Writing Program from 1994 to 1998.

Part I

“Stand up, Stupid, and go to the back of the classroom.”

Marvina White: I grew up in Upper Manhattan at Dykeman Street in a – I think it was called the Dykeman Houses then. I didn’t think of it or realize that it was a project for years, I have to say.

* * * * *

But in any case I grew up in a family where my being a girl – and I think a lot of it had to do with my being a girl – meant that what my parents really wanted for me, was to be able to cook and sew and know how to vacuum and clean and all of those things I did. But going to school was really not – I mean my parents had not graduated from high school. My father ran away from home when he was 15 and he became a Merchant Marine. My mother grew up in the Bronx and neither of them – I wouldn’t say that they didn’t exactly value education, but they saw my desire to go to school as a – as something that would mean that I will be alone for my life, that nobody would want to marry me.

* * * * *

But in any case I began having to cook dinner for everyone from the time I was 11 years old. And therefore school took a back seat pretty much. I mean there were things I did, because I really did love school.
When I was in third grade in public school, in Upper Manhattan I think it may have been, I don’t know, PS 152 or PS 52, I had a teacher who... I was about to do something, and I was... and then at that point getting to third grade I was a happy.... I loved school, I loved my teachers, I was happy to be there. But this moment came when I was trying to make out something on the mimeograph sheet. We were going to – I could actually say the words, I remember what they were supposed to be. But I couldn’t read all of it and I was somewhat shy. So I didn’t – I struggled around it and the teacher suddenly just started yelling at me and just told me, ‘Stand up, Stupid, and [00:04:00] go to the back of the classroom! All you Negroes need to move back to Harlem!’

And so, I mean I was seven years old, and I just – so I got up, I went in the back of the room because I was a good girl, but I couldn’t stay there. I just burst into tears and ran out of the room and ran down to the principal’s office to try to confess.

But it wound up being that my grandfather wrote a letter to the teacher who did this, telling her and threatening her essentially to never speak to me that way again, to... and talking about the value of Negroes in the country and in this world. That moment though really kind of never left me. I mean, I’ve never forgotten it and I think it also at the time, because it was 1956, a lot of things were happening to black students, to little girls and boys that made the headlines in the daily news, on the newspaper all the time – in the news all the time. 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 as or not as capable – and maybe I didn’t really belong, maybe we shouldn’t have been in the classroom, maybe all the Negroes should move back to Harlem, although I didn’t even live in Harlem when she had said this, which was one point that my grandfather pointed out. This was a neighborhood school I was in, but she was talking to me as if I didn’t belong there.

I, in middle school discovered that I was, or junior high school is what we called it, I discovered that I was really good in science. I always did like science. I was not the great math student, but I was [00:06:00] good in science and I loved helping people, as a result of my Catholicism I think. So I was always involved in some charity or some volunteer work. And so at one point I just thought it will be great if I became a doctor. And there was a series of books called, “So you want to be a...” whatever. So this book was “So you want to be a doctor” and I bought that book and I carried it around with me everywhere. I carried it around, like on Easter I brought it to my – to dinner at my grandparents’ house and for the most part it set me up for ridicule within my family.

Somebody looked at it and said “Do you know how long it takes to be a doctor, you will be an old maid by then, and you don’t want to be spinster.” So there were, there were those pushes on the part of the family and at the same time my grandfather thought that I was smart. I mean, I was his favorite grandchild and I spent a lot of time on his lap and a lot of time talking with him.
He went to DeWitt Clinton High School which was a pretty good school in the Bronx in those years. And considering that he was born in 1903, going to DeWitt Clinton was a big deal.

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So, although I didn’t have the support of my family, I was determined to go to college and I actually had a savings account that I just established, because I used to work at a shoe store after school, and on Sundays days, and on Saturdays. And so what happened is, a big fight in our house when I said I wanted to go to college and they wouldn’t sign a loan form that I had got from – I don’t even know where, I don’t even remember that part. What I remember is that they basically decided to take the money that I had in my account and say that I owed it to them, because I, you know, I lived under their roof and I owed it to them because I [00:08:00] I never paid rent and I didn’t pay for my own support, so that money was gone. But I was determined, during this time I probably – I think, I know I did, I actually also ran away from home. So I was determined to get out of there and if they weren’t going to support me, I figured a way and so…

Part II

“The whole experience was one of human beings engaging with ideas.”

I discovered the Pre-Bac program as a result of some neighborhood outreach that I learned about from a friend. My grandfather’s address allowed me to apply, because I didn’t live in the catchment area for SEEK at the time that I applied. And with my grandfather’s support I submitted my application and I got in and it was really the – it changed my life, so…

* * * * *

So in Barbara’s class, in the summer of ‘66, I arrived. I, maybe this may be, may be irrelevant, but nevertheless I got myself the clothes I thought a college student would wear. I went down to the village. I got certain shoes. I had a certain bag. I carried my things in a particular way. But mainly the classroom which I can actually see in my mind’s eye right now – it was in Mott Hall; 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; we listened to her give us, really kind of brief lecture/discussion starter, exciting as she walked around [00:10:00] the room talking to us, looking us in our eye. There was no blackboard. It was not a classroom designed. It was a seminar room. There was a big table. We sat around the table, the teacher walked around. It was – the whole experience was just one of human beings engaging with ideas.

And I was now a student, but I was also a person whose ideas and written words meant something to the teacher, specifically meant something in relation to what I was reading, how I was thinking about what I was reading. And her response to me was very much – I mean I – she may have even written actually on the page Marvina at the end in her comments, Marvina I like this or that and this is what I think you need to do. But in the – on the pages of those papers, she responded to specific ideas and thoughts I had about the books that – and maybe even what she said, that made me feel like I was having a conversation with her about my thoughts. I had never had that experience before.
I never had anyone actually read something I had written, tell me what he thought about or she thought about what I had written without a grade and actually in this class there were 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. It was just wonderful. I never wanted those sessions to end, and I think…

Part III

“They were devoted to seeing that we became successful, functioning students….”

So from – in September when I first started, what I had, what I had were – I think I probably took one class that was not for credit, that was a composition course. And then there were other classes that I took that were mainstream classes. I think what they did was to look at what we did in high school and see where they thought we might be able to function in the mainstream.

* * * * *

But for me it was to come to school, go to classes, do what I needed to do in those classrooms – in that classroom, meet with my counselor to talk about how it was going.

The most wonderful part of it was the devotion on the part of the faculty and the staff of the program itself. There was a way in which I felt really cherished by them; they – I felt as if their whole – they were devoted to seeing that we became successful, functioning students on that campus and in our lives.

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Barbara and Betty lived in an apartment building, the same apartment building. And so Barbara would have these, these times when she would invite students up to her house and Betty would come and we would all sit around talking about the women’s consciousness raising or whatever, sometimes politics, very often the Harlem renaissance or some, some ideas that came out of the classroom that were so exciting. Because for me it was the first time that I’d ever understood that there were Black people in New York even who were – who had written books and written plays and, you know, produced art. And, you know, the Black Arts Movement was big at that time, by the way, and Barbara and her boyfriend, who was a poet, were very involved in that movement and therefore as students we became involved in that movement – I did, actually not everybody, but I did.

* * * * *

And so what happened to me at City College was that I, I saw – I learned how to become a student. I’d always been a student, but I was student who was kind of winging it, trying to manage, taking care of my brother, cooking food, making sure certain groceries were in, doing
the laundry. I mean, I had those tasks to do and so normally I was squeezing in my school work some kind of way for the most part. I was always looking for some way to save myself, this much I know.

* * * * *

But for the most part the program itself represented for me hope that I could understand and become a really high achieving student. And by the way, I had been labeled, I don’t know by whom now, as an underachiever. I mean it was always for many years, I was seen as somebody who could do better, but actually wasn’t doing better. So I performed pretty well on IQ tests and things like that and yet my grades didn’t measure up and so…

**Part IV**

“Many of us were having difficulty… understanding how to do the work, given what was happening to us at home.”

In addition to the experience with Barbara and the fabulous teachers that I had in my first year, in my first semester, Betty Rawls and the counseling staff in particular showed me the ways in which my psychological and emotional self needed to get – I needed to become… I don’t, I don’t… they were interfer… it was my – what turns out to probably have been depression or certain struggles I was having, were really interfering with my ability to perform in the classroom.

And I think that the – a certain kind of, you know – my having to leave campus early and get home. By then my parents moved to Mt. Vernon, so I was having to get to the train station, take the D train up to 205th Street or whatever that stop was, and then take a bus, and then walk to the house and cook dinner. That meant that I didn’t get to go the library, it meant I didn’t get to join any clubs, it meant that I didn’t go to lectures, it meant that I – all the ways in which college at least in my imagination, and then actually really for some people exists, didn’t exist for me pretty much except in the classroom.

* * * * *

What happened as a result of meeting with Betty was, it became clear that my performance in the classroom was suffering as a result of the ways in which I was having to manage life at home. And I wasn’t the only one. I mean a lot of the students, I don’t know how many, but many of us were having difficulty not with the work itself, but with understanding how to do the work given what was happening to us at home. So there were other people who had no place to study. They didn’t have the same chores, but they had some other way that they weren’t able to, to do the work required and to really fully engage in everything City had to offer.

And so, by the end of my first semester, I was on probation and Betty and Barbara decided that they needed to get in touch with my parents to tell them that this opportunity that I had was going to be lost if they kept insisting that I do all of the things they wanted me to do at home. And also there was a suspicion on the part of – I don’t know if it was my father or both of them,
that I really wasn’t probably going to the library, but I was probably meeting a boy or doing some other – something, and that was their fear. I mean…

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And unfortunately it meant that those things interfered with my studying. I don’t – they had no idea of what it meant to be a college student, none.

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Betty Rawls, actually Betty and Barbara were best friends which was good for me, because I connected – the two of them, they really were the women and the two people in SEEK who basically rescued me. Betty called my mother and suggested that she and my father come down to school and meet with her to see, to understand what it was that I needed to become successful, because I was really – I was on probation as I said. And I was also struggling a lot. I don’t quite – I know that I spent time on the phone with Betty. I mean she would – she was available. I had her phone number.

I remember being in the phone booth in Cohen Library at one point talking to her about work that I needed to do and how I was having a hard time doing it. And I actually think that conversation led to her understanding better what would help me. And I don’t know when the SEEK dormitory idea came up, but it seems to me that it came pretty quickly as a result of people like me who were having trouble in their homes. And so with Betty, and I mean I saw her regularly, I saw her in the classroom, out of the classroom, I…

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So what these people – primarily, Mina, Barbara and Betty – saw was that I and some other students needed to get out of their houses. And so they established the dormitory which was in a single room occupancy hotel really on 71st Street and Broadway. They managed to get four floors I think in that building and argue for those of us, and I needed an argument, to get out of our houses.

And so what was fabulous, that – those two things that people who were teaching and the opportunity to move into the dorm really meant that I was able to graduate and that I became a student. That – the experience of living with other students and studying, actually having something called the study lounge and places where we would all gather and talk about what we’re reading or sometimes we would gather and just do our work, it was a dream. That was the second sort of fabulous thing that happened. And part of it is, when you think about City College, it’s an urban campus. There was no place to have a dormitory. There were no places to have the dream college experience, the way that, you know, people have when they go away to school. And yet the dorm allowed for some of that to happen.

And for me it meant the certain kind of delight in going and saying to myself from this time to that time I’m going to read my psych books, and I’m going to start writing my paper, and I’m going to take a break and get a snack and talk to my friend so and so about this. I mean that – it
was, it was heaven. It was heaven. I just – at home I mean I barely had a place to be – I shared a room with my brother until I was 16 years old. So – and then when I went to City, we had moved to another place, but it was the first time I had a room of my own, but basically I didn’t have any way of doing my work at home. So the dorm enabled me to actually become a student fully.

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Betty, I don’t remember when this happened, but Betty at one point was engaged to someone and they decided to go on a plane ride to meet his parents and she wound up disappearing for, I don’t know how many number of weeks. Her – their plane crashed and she died. And that was a very big loss for me.

Part V

“I learned how to express myself in ways, and I learned that what I had to say was worth expressing.”

At least which… Writing and – was always something that I was – that I did well. Of course once I got to City, I realized there were things I needed to fix. And I didn’t really know fully how to fix them. And at one point Barbara, it must be Barbara, Barbara suggested that maybe I could go and see Mina Shaughnessy, who had an office in a hut next to the running track down South Campus. And, and so I went to see her. I introduced myself and she was, she was so lovely. I mean she was also – she was physically beautiful. She had a very sort of sweet, soft, embracing voice, and appearing at her door meant that she was yours. I mean that I never went to her office where she would say “I can’t see you now, can you come back at this time.” I don’t know how that works, because I don’t really know how she could possibly have been so free or maybe it’s just in my imagination, I don’t know. But the thing is that she – I brought her a paper that I was struggling with.

My main problem at the time were run-on sentences. Well, there were two things, run-on sentences and the idea that I couldn’t begin to figure out how to flesh out an argument. I would say what I had to say and that was the end of that and, you know, Barbara and other teachers were kind of trying to help me, but I really didn’t – I didn’t get it. So Mina was so embracing. She looked at the paper, the first paper I took her, and she pointed out precisely where this thing that I thought was a sentence was actually run on. But we didn’t focus so much on the grammar and that’s not just to say the grammar is not important, but she talked about how this was burying my idea, how stopping this run on at the appropriate place really meant that I could say more and that I could, that I could see what I was arguing.

I mean, I hate to go into this in this way, but it was true that the verb then became more alive. And she never used those terms, but I learned how to express myself in ways and I learned that what I had to say was worth expressing, that these – that when I thought I had nothing, what to say or when I thought that something was dumb even, she would point out what I was actually saying and where I needed to say more. And the value of that, the value of that time with her, felt, you know, like a warm embrace really. She also did all kinds of things. This is true for the
people I had who are in the program itself. They loved us. It felt like they loved us. I mean she – this is Mina now, she would talk about me as a whole person. She, one summer, one Christmas, gave me a bottle of Miss Dior perfume which I – I mean I don’t even remember why she did that, but she did that.

And when I was worried about being interested in reading detective novels, which I still love reading by the way, and how in English department those kinds of – that kind of reading was not valued and not really very smart, she talked about what was smart about that. I mean she didn’t use the word smart, but she just said, this is the analytical part of you. This is what – you enjoy this, because you are… and she found a way to connect me the person with the things in the world I found interesting and even pointed a way for me to use those things to succeed in school. I mean, this is what I think any really solid, strong professor should be able to do for their students. It takes time and for some reason she had the time.

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The people, people like Mina, people like Barbara and Betty, and a couple of other professors I had, and one other counselor, Charley Russell, and actually because Barbara – and because Betty – when Betty died, Charley Russell took her students. And I don’t – I guess, I don’t know what to say except that without that support I would not have made it. I would not have been able to continue at City College. I would have failed out, I’m sure.

Part VI

“Let’s not worry about that; here’s a way to do your work.”

For the most part there were also a lot of professors who are not in the SEEK program itself who are also just wonderful. I mean Ed Quinn was one of them. He was another person who – you know, I went and you could cut this out, but I need to just say this. I, I was taking a Shakespeare course with him and I was intimidated by the kids who were just, you know, raising their hand before he even finished his question, and I was afraid to talk. And then we had these weekly papers to do and I found myself paralyzed, because I was feeling as was my – a theme for me. I was feeling not so smart, not as capable as other people. I didn’t get to City College as a normal, regular person, you know, a regular student with an 87 average and a Regent’s diploma. I didn’t have those things. And that was kind of on my shoulder a lot. That’s something I had to work through a lot with the counselors and just on my own.

But in any case, Ed Quinn had me in his office telling me how to write these papers that I felt I couldn’t write. He would give us like one question about some play, King Lear or something is one I remember. And I went to his office to say “I can’t do this” and I talked about what was bothering me about the classroom. And he just said, those kids are used to talking – they, they love hearing themselves. It doesn’t mean what they were saying is worth anything. So, let’s not worry about that. Here’s a way to do your work. And what he suggested, which I still use even now, is to write this paper as if you’re writing it, a letter to yourself or to someone and then just go back and take out first person and there you’ve got whatever it is you have to say. But that little switching of the audience idea, I took and I – actually I still use this, I mean in my life, so…
Part VII

Stigmas, labels, and racism: “There were days that were hard as a result of that.”

So I think the experience was: meet with a counselor, talk about how classes are going and maybe we even got our assignments from the counselors. And then it was just functioning on City College campus, but not as a regular student. I mean I think that because there were so few Black students when I went there, anybody – the whole question actually became for many people, are you SEEK [00:32:00] or are you regular? And, while it was fabulous being there, there were some ways in which it was difficult being a SEEK student. What was beautiful about this program is that the counselors were very sensitive to the fact that there was a certain amount of hostility surrounding us, both from professors on campus and also from other students who were suspicious of the number of – we’re talking about hundred AND something students out of a huge population. But nevertheless there were ways in which our little program seemed to come with a big loud announcement and I don’t quite know how that happened.

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I was in a class with a professor and I actually love this class, even though he was reading from yellowing notes and it was boring on one sense, but the readings were great. There was another Black student in the classroom, who was much lighter than I was, who did come to class late almost every time. So I got back a paper from him. I don’t remember the grade, it wasn’t a bad grade, but at the bottom of it was, you know: “Please try to make sure you get to class on time.” And I read it and thought, well he doesn’t even realize who I am. And so after class I went up to him to say, you know, “Professor Wagner, I’m always on time and I think you have me confused.” And before I could finish he just went ballistic. I mean, I started crying, he started berating me and I wound up running upstairs to the counseling office to talk to Charley Russell about what had happened.

And there were professors and also other students, I mean the temperament at City, the – what other kids felt about SEEK students [00:34:00] and the environment that we were in was, you know, positive within the bubble of SEEK, but there were lot of negative things, a lot of – you know, not just hostility from other – from from students who thought they got in the right way or the lane that was the one that led to City and they got in appropriately. There were, you know, other Black students who wanted to make sure that people knew they were not SEEK students. And that probably ran through the whole time that I was there.

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So, I entered City – I have to say that I really did not know what I would major in, I was just glad to be a student there. And I would say the classes I loved most were biology, psychology and I forgot the other. I think there were many sociology classes that I also liked. But I was afraid in my other courses to acknowledge to the person teaching, that maybe I needed to spend some time in the office with office hours getting to understand whatever it was that seemed to be blocking me from doing better in the class, or maybe I was confused when I left a lecture. But I
never went – I don’t think I ever went to any office hours of any professor, with the exception of the English department people who were all so embracing, with the exception of, you know, maybe one or two of them.

And so I wound up majoring in English primarily because of them, and because I could do that work. I didn’t, I saw a way to do it and I did like it. And they were, I suppose too, Barbara was so wonderful that I think the [00:36:00] idea of – no, I know the idea of becoming a little Barbara sort of was appealing to me.

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I think that I never really although my experience at SEEK and at City was a good one, I really always felt like I have to sort of cover my shortcomings unless I knew that the person who was wanting – to whom I needed to go for help would be generous and embracing and not ridicule or reject me and so…

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And it is true that at a certain point I did think that I could see Barbara and what she was doing so clearly, and I think my interest in art, in books and in literature anyway, and the way in which the Black Arts Movement was so alive – I mean I was involved in a lot of, a lot of really great, you know, sort of salons I guess they’re called, at Larry Neil’s house and, you know, I was very involved, so that was a reason I became an English major. It’s just those other things would have been useful if I’d been able to stand up and explain to people what I didn’t understand and have the faith that they would embrace me and not reject me and say, get out of here, stupid, like my third grade teacher did which is fairly what – I think that was my fear,… so…

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And similar things happened at City in the sense that well these two things coupled my sense of maybe I shouldn’t really be here, maybe there is a way that I really am not as smart, maybe there is a way that if you’re Black you really can’t [00:38:00] think. I mean there was this – and, and you know, because of my personality I would say more than anything. And so the experiences I had with teachers who may have reinforced that negative idea, and they certainly weren’t alone at thinking that Black people were not as capable or not as smart. Those things sometimes did make it hard. Those were – there were days that were hard as a result of that.

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And even – I mean as an adult I was not – until very recently, I never acknowledged that I was a SEEK student or that I was in any kind of special program which I don’t say proudly, but that is a fact. At Princeton there was a program that we wound up developing to help students acclimate themselves when they came to Princeton, students who quote, you know – ‘didn’t belong there’, but who had been admitted. And I may have talked a little bit about my own experience at City to them to try to help – I was on a committee trying to develop such a program, so…
Epilogue

“Respect for me as a person and a student – that’s what the SEEK program gave to me, and probably to everybody there.”

And graduating from City College in Lewisohn Stadium, which I don’t think exists anymore, was a powerful, wonderful moment for me.

* * * * *

It was my grandfather who was most enthusiastic about this. I mean, he is the one who was just constantly there monitoring how I was doing and seeing how things were going.

* * * * *

So I graduated in 1970. Actually I think technically I probably graduated in ‘71, because I think there was a paper [00:40:00] that I remember delivering to my – to Mark Merski, who was a poet and a great teacher that I had. That paper was lingering, so I think actually – in any case I graduated and I worked at a couple of agencies in the city. I was actually enthusiastic about working and I hadn’t really thought about graduate school. I was wanting to stay independent. I was determined to not move back home, so I needed to get work. And there was a program that was a – there was a tutoring program that for ESL students and so there came this opportunity for me to direct that program and also go to a Masters program that Mina was putting together in pedagogy at City College.

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But in any case, so I – you know, a lot of my life and where I am now actually really started there, it’s true, at City. I mean it is a fact. So I taught there for – I don’t know, maybe 16 years or so and then Arnold and I moved to Princeton. He, and I managed to get a job there, starting as an associate director running – establishing a writing program there. And so I guess, that there is a way that without the SEEK program, without these opportunities, and without the people and the structure that was in place there, I don’t know where I would be in my life. I’m sure – I mean I was a survivor, so I would have done something. But considering that it cost nothing, that we got a stipend of $15 a day, I think we got all of our meals once this – this is once I’m at the dorm [00:42:00] which was after my first year. We ate in some restaurant on 72nd Street. And so really, that program launched me into the life that I have now, my life.

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So – but the main point of what I’m talking about here is that respect for me as a person and a student, that’s what the SEEK program gave to me and probably to everybody there. A kind of, here you are, this is how you do it, this is what you need to do yourself to succeed, and this is what I see in you that is valuable. And I will be with you until you get there and that’s what I think that program did.
Credits:

Marvina White: An Oral History of the CCNY 1960s SEEK Program

Special Thanks to Professor Marvina White

A Comp Comm Production, 2014.

Produced, Directed & Edited by Sean Molloy.

“Put Love in” by Linda Draper (2013)
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Works Cited


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Francee Covington: An Oral History of the CCNY 1960’s SEEK Program and The Paper

https://youtu.be/rBfCRp0fTkg (June 8, 2015)

In 1965, City College launched it’s “Pre-Bac” program by admitting and supporting 113 poor and working class students who did not qualify under CCNY’s traditional standards. (Levy 1965).

Pre-Bac was a huge success. After one year, 72% of its students were still studying at CCNY. Over half had a “C” average or higher. (Berger 1966 3).

Renamed “SEEK” in 1966, the program got even better: 85% of the new Fall 1966 and Fall 1967 SEEK students were still studying at CCNY after one year. (Berger 1969 Table 40).

Close to 40% of the 1965-67 SEEK students would graduate from City College by 1972. (Frost 1972 1).

One of those graduates was Francee Covington.

After graduating in 1970, Francee worked as field producer for WCBS.

She then earned a graduate degree in political anthropology in Ghana.

Over her 35 year career as a television writer, director and producer in New York, Boston and San Francisco, Francee has won many awards, including five Emmy nominations.

Part I

“My mother and I….. just the two of us, formed a picket line around the school.”

Well I was born at Kings County Hospital in Brooklyn and I grew up in Brooklyn and I had a great upbringing, strong parents, um an only child, uh the first grandchild [00:02:00] on both sides, so I was truly spoiled and doted upon which um I had no complaints about.

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My father was a truck driver and would-be poet and my mother—when I was very young she worked in a factory, collating papers. And that was before everything was done by machine including putting all of the carbon between sheets a paper to make pads um for taking phone messages and that sort of thing. And then later she um went to school—to night school—to really brush up on secretarial skills and she worked for quite some time for the State of New York, uh in the speaker’s office as a receptionist.

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And my father, he grew up in Inglewood, New Jersey. So he went to St. Johns for one semester and that was all that he could manage.
Well my mother wanted to go to college early on in her life. She was one of five children. She was the second eldest between two boys, before, much later two girls also came along. And she had a conversation with my grandfather which she told me more than once, about going to college to become a home economics teacher. And he told her in no uncertain terms that he would not sacrifice to send her to college, because all girls were going to do would be to grow up and have babies, get married, that sort of thing. So he would send the boys, he would be willing to send the boys—well, the boys were not interested. And so my mother got married and had children.

At home our dinner conversations where about work and school and what was going on in the world. So, I got a very good worldview from my parents, uh about the plate of African-Americans, about Marcus Garvey, about Malcolm X, about the work that Dr. King was doing, and about my responsibility to assist in uplifting black people. It was just that simple. It was not that you would sit on the sidelines and do nothing or say nothing and that you would always be someone that people could hold up as an example of how a young woman with a brain would conduct herself.

When I was in high school, I was the President of the Youth Branch of the, um NCCJ, which was then the National Conference of Christians and Jews. And we would spend summers at Briarcliff Manor in New York, uh—a week. All of the kids who were involved with NCCJ activities, and we would talk about human relations, we would talk about civil rights, we would talk about so many different things. Um, and I also was a youth member of the Congress of Racial Equality. My aunt, Mary Ellen, who had recommended me for the SEEK program—she was a field secretary for CORE. So, the Congress of Racial Equality was headed by, uh James Farmer who became a cabinet member uh later on in life. And we were demonstrating against a lot of the inequities in public schools in New York. Even at that time in New York City, the black schools got the worst textbooks, the most inexperienced teachers. It was a travesty. So there was a big boycott one February 3rd where all of the black children were encouraged to stay out of school. And my mother and I were assigned the school all the way out in Brooklyn and it was cold, it was snowing, when it wasn’t sleeted and just the two of us formed a picket line at the school going round and round. My mother took off work that day to be with me. And to this day it is one of the most incredible gifts she could have given me, that I think that this cause is so important, I think that you kids are so important that I will forgo work for this day to demonstrate.

When the um, World Book Encyclopedias arrived and they were just so stunningly gorgeous and I knew my mother had gotten this extravagance for me in junior high school and I would just flip
through the pages and read things, you know. And it was the kind of home where I would say, “oh mom, can I have this new whatever?” “No. We don’t have money for that.” You know, “Mom can you buy me this?” “No, we don’t have that kind of money.” And then I will say mom, “I saw this book, that I really want.” And it was always, “Well how much is it?” So that was something that was supported always. And brains in my family were considered paramount. Um, even visiting my grandmother in North Carolina during the summers when I was small, um and she would take me downtown, you know, to get this and that with her. And she would run into someone who knew her or someone who is not negro, uh she would run into someone and they would say, “Oh, Lilly, is that your granddaughter? She is so cute!” And my grandmother would pull me to her and she would say, “And she’s right smart too.” So I knew smart was an important thing and I knew that college was this enchanted land that I wanted to go to.

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And I went to PS 3 in Brooklyn and PS 11 in Brooklyn then I went to Lefferts Junior High School and then on to George W. Wingate High School. And I was very active in school. I was in the uh — uh the Human Relations Club. I became President of the Human Relations Club. I worked on our literary magazine uh, in high school. Um, it was called “Spectrum” and um published in that. And just lots of activities, lots of activities including writing activities— because we had an annual showcase and competition called Sing. So each class in the high school—um, each grade—put together the equivalent of a Broadway show. So I was most often on the writing team writing the script for their show and I mean everything was collaborative, so there wasn’t just one scriptwriter. And, uh people would write new lyrics to Broadway tunes that were very popular at that time. And one year in addition to that I was in charge of costuming and my mother was furious—because of course I didn’t do all the sewing, she did all the sewing.

Part II

“I was so happy. I was elated. I was, like, ‘Yes! It’s finally going to happen for me, that I go to college….’”

Well, I always knew I wanted to go to college. I was in an academic high school and a lot of my friends were becoming Regents scholars and, you know, this is like May or June. And I knew my parents always wanted me to go to college, but by that time, by the time I was in high school my mother had remarried and the mechanics of exactly how to get from point A to point B kind of fell by the wayside. So, I was left without a choice on — at the end of May, because I’d missed so many uh crucial deadlines. And I went to work for the New York Telephone Company in Downtown, Brooklyn. I was an information operator uh that summer, handling all five boroughs.

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My aunt called me, my aunt Mary Ellen Fifer called me to let me know that a search was on for students to come into a new program at CCNY, called the SEEK program and she said that I
should expect a call from someone or that I should follow up with the person she gave me the contact information. I can’t exactly remember which way it went, but at any point—uh, one point—I did go and talk to the lady about uh this opportunity and she was giving me these wonderful ideas about what to [00:12:00] expect. You know, your books will be paid for, you’ll get a stipend to cover transportation, and that sort of thing. And I was elated; I was like, “Oh good, I really want this,” and she asked for our address and I gave her the address, because at that time we lived in Crown Heights, right across the street from the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. And she called me a few days later and she says “I’m really sorry, but the address you gave me doesn’t fall within uh locations for you to qualify.” And I said “oh, well I was just there with my aunt for the summer since my parents are away.” So then I gave her the address where we had lived for, practically forever on Fulton Street in the heart of Bedford Stuyvesant. And she says “oh that address is fine, you’re good to go.” I was like, “Yes!” And I was like, “Oh my goodness, I fibbed but what—what else could I do?” I couldn’t do anything because I saw it so clearly it was right there, I was about to lose it. And so I snatched it back.

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And she said that I was accepted into the SEEK program. I was so happy. I was elated. I was like yes it’s finally going to happen for me that I go to college right after high school, which is what I always wanted. And um, my parents were so happy—that would be my mother and her husband at the time, were so happy. I just floated and when they said show up to CCNY, I’d never been to the campus before uh and when I got there and I looked around, it was so magnificent. It was [00:14:00] um so stunning, it was like an Ivy League University. You know, the kind that you saw in movies with these stately halls and people scurrying about and looking very important and books everywhere. It was great. It was really great.

**Part III**

“Everyone knew that this was an opportunity not to be wasted.”

So by the time I got to City College, I had an idea of what I wanted to do and that every person could make some small difference.

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I went to the March on Washington with Congress of Racial Equality, August 28th, which was also my mother’s birthday. We gathered at 5:00 AM and I went down, and all through college—high school and college um The Women’s Movement, uh the mobilization against the war in Vietnam, classicism, sexism—all of those issues were important to me. And I was a part of a lot of conversations related to that: um, the moratorium, just so many things. So, I say that in addition to the fact that the first campaign I ever volunteered on was Shirley Chisholm for Congress.

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So my first semester at City College, um I met Dean Ballard and I was so impressed. I was like, “Wow, he’s a Dean,” because in high school we didn’t have deans; we just had principals, and vice-principals, and that sort of thing. And he was such a warm man, big guy. I became friends with him and his [00:16:00] wife, Audreen, and actually I used to baby-sit their daughter later on. But at first blush, he was just a great guy. He welcomed us all there and told us where his office was, to see him at any time if we had any problems. We received our schedules and started our Pre-Bac classes as well as I think one um you know, regular class. And it was on; it was to the races. And we did not know each other previously, the SEEK students, we come— we come from all five boroughs. Um, no one from my high school I knew and I—it was the same with most of the students, that there were people—that we were all new. We were all—we had new teachers, they were new to the program, we were new to the program. And, uh it was impressed upon us that as pioneers, uh we would be paving the way for future classes if things went well. And we wanted things to go well. We wanted things to go well for us and we wanted to go— things to go well for the people who were to follow us. And our teachers were, were you know, very supportive, but very, um rigorous in their training of us. And it was such, um an intellectual environment. You know, the kind of thing that usually doesn’t happen to you really until you are in your junior or senior year. The idea that it’s a small gathering of people, most of whom were learning, one who’s leading, and you’re exchanging ideas and you’re shouting things out [00:18:00] to the teacher. She’s asking questions—Toni Cade—she’s asking questions, you’re shouting, “Oh, this is this,” “Well what does that remind you of?” “It reminds me of that! It reminds me this!” And so everybody is jumping in and learning from each other, um and supporting each other, and doing the very best that we could. I mean there were no slackers, cause everyone knew that this was an opportunity not to be wasted.

Part IV

“You felt that you could tell your instructors-- Barbara Christian, Addison Gayle, Toni Cade of course— anything that was happening with you.”

So we could talk to anyone on the staff. We could talk to Dean Ballard, we could talk to the Assistant Director who at that time was Ann Cook, um she changed her name to [00:18:51] Shiko Quianna, and uh, we could talk to the teachers once we got to know them. There was a person, Mr. Bernstein, who was working on his PhD in psychology, so I think they felt it would be very beneficial for us to have group sessions where we could open up about the experience of being on campus and any difficulties that we were having. However, the um—the group sessions were very quiet. He would start with an open-ended question regarding how we’re doing, how classes are, how our home environment was, because we were all at home at that time. And no one would respond, because it just was not part of our culture, not part of African-American and Puerto Rican culture to express uh things that are happening in your home with perfect strangers. It just was not done. You handled family business [00:20:00] within the family. You might tell your aunt, your uncle, your cousins, definitely your siblings if you had them.

Um, so that particular construct did not work so well. It may have worked better later on, but people were reticent to be forthcoming about what was actually going on in their lives in that setting. But outside of that setting you felt that you could tell your instructors: Barbara Christian, Addison Gayle, Toni Cade, of course, anything that was happening with you, because you had
established a rapport. And in your writing classes you were talking about various things. So that served as an entre to talk about other things as well. So even if you didn’t open up in the counseling—the formal counseling sessions—you were able to get counseling. And also, um later on Charlie Russell was a counselor and a lot of people gravitated to him, especially the young men, so…

Part V

“…all of us as students being excited, sharing ideas, writing ideas down, getting feedback—and the feedback was constant and it was positive.”

I was a student in Toni Cade’s class and as a student in those days this—the classes were not large for Pre-Bac students. They were small like seminars and that was very good so that the instructors got a chance to know you, you got a chance to know them, and you work closely together to improve your writing if you were in a writing class and I was in one of her writing classes. And it was just marvelous. She was excited about teaching. Uh, it was clear to me that it wasn’t just a job [00:22:00] to her and that we weren’t just any students that this was an opportunity for someone who was a bit older—she wasn’t terribly much older than we were—who was a bit older than we were and had this wealth of knowledge and had seen the world and interpreted the world for herself and was helping us to get the skills to do the same thing. So, it was great, it was great. I had her the first year of class, so that would have been 1966, and it was a Pre-Bac class, so I don’t think I got any credit for that class but it didn’t matter, it was part of that process of being in the SEEK program the very first year. And the details of how the writing was handled and how it was evaluated, um I don’t really remember exactly, but I do remember her being extremely supportive. And all of us as students being excited, sharing ideas, writing ideas down, getting feedback, and the feedback was constant and it was positive. And that really gave us the platform that we needed to succeed later on, because we went into other classes uh full of confidence that we could do this work that we had rigorous training with our teachers in the SEEK program and that we were ready.

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A lot of work, but very well worthy effort to—to have what 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 [00:24:00] and it was an amazing experience. And Toni Cade, um looking at my work and giving me such positive reinforcement, um led us to be great friends. And she helped all of us.

Barbara Christian helped all of us. Barbara Christian was amazing. She was tiny—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 you know, in your—in your papers or you’re going to take a different stand?” Um very, very good…

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And Addison Gayle was a tough marker. He was 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.

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We had papers that we had to do, um we of course were graded on class participation. Everybody aced class participation because New Yorkers love to talk, so there you go. Um we had smaller papers and larger [00:26:00] papers that we had to turn in. We had to—uh we would have quizzes, we would have exams. Uh I don’t remember 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.

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We were given lots of assignments about current events and books and that sort of thing, but actually no matter what the assignment was, I would always put in something about black people or poor people. Whether it was okay that NASA—I love NASA—NASA putting a man on the moon, okay, that’s great. But we still have people who were concerned about kids eating peeled lead paint in Spanish Harlem. Instead of putting a man on the moon, can we put some men in these apartments to clean up all of this mess so that kids don’t suffer mental illness as a result? It’s a—it was always in the front of my mind of what was going on in my community. And I would give all of the details, whatever professor would want concerning their broad view. But I also wanted to make sure I included my view.

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And the English teachers and the English classes, uh were very good, because you had to debate, um not debate so much as to support your position, whatever your position was. Whether it’d be verbally or on paper. You know, and to be able to [00:28:00] get the skills necessary to really lay out your ideas, your opinions of how things are and how things should be.

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During that time ah Leontyne Price performed Cleopatra for the Metropolitan Opera and I wrote a paper about why did it take so long for a black woman to play Cleopatra. I got an A on that one, I was glad, but it took a special professor to say okay, I see that you’re not just ranting, you have actually laid out an historical analysis of why this should have happened earlier and it shouldn’t be a big deal by this point.

Part VI

“Great universities are not judged by their incoming students; they’re judged by their graduates.”
So when SEEK started and we began with it, um not everyone on campus was pleased — I’m talking about the faculty. I think for the students, some students felt that we were undeserving to be there, once they heard the barebones of what the program was about. And some of the teachers were openly hostile. Um I had an instructor in History, Ludmilla [00:29:31], I can’t remember her last name, but I think Russian accent who on the first day of class asked everyone who was in the SEEK program to stand. And so we stood, we’re all like okay, we’re standing and then she proceeded to tell our fellow classmates that we were part of this new experiment and we hadn’t gone through the usual channels to be at a university like [00:30:00] City College and that—after that my mind kind of shut off until she told us to sit down. So I thought wow, this is absolutely amazing. We have been called out unjustly and um certain assumptions have been made about us that I wasn’t aware of before, uh certain assumptions have been made about us by people who are there to teach us. And it was a history class and I thought to myself you know what, I am going to pass this class, I know that. But she has told me that she has set the bar for me and for my fellow SEEK students really, really high and so now I know who she is. She has no idea who I am, but I know who she is. And of course, you know, we shared our experience with the SEEK staff and they were appalled. Um, I cannot imagine being at a university where if your father is the head of IBM, you’re called out. So, she immediately saw us as vulnerable, unworthy and ignorant—that we would never measure up. And the most stunning thing about it is she never realized that one: the people that she was castigating were the people who built the country that she now lived in and two: that [00:32:00] great universities are not judged by their incoming students, they’re judged by their graduates. So if I have the ability to get in and get out with that sheepskin, it was equal to anybody else who graduated from that institution with the sheepskin.

Part VII

“It was the SEEK dorm, so people from all of the campuses were there.”

Oh, I went to college expecting to major in Journalism, which I did, at the very beginning. But at the same time I was going to college, I also worked uh, at WCBS TV in New York and I worked um in the evenings—three evenings a week—answering phones, pulling wire copy, we’re talking about the olden days, when there was wire copy to pull and be distributed and assembled for the teleprompter for the anchors. So I was able to do a lot of my homework at night at the desk, that’s what it’s called, the assignment desk um, at WCBS. And so I was talking to Jim Jensen who for a very long time was an anchor at uh, the Flagship Station. And he told me one day, he said, “You know, I’m not sure you need to major in journalism,” he said, “you already know how to write, why don’t you major in something that you can write about?”

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So I was a Political Science major, I took a lot of history courses as well. Um, I took any course at all related to African-Americans and [00:34:00] related to the African continent. And those classes were very good. We were also able to um uh, work with a few other students at the Alamac Hotel [00:34:14]. I lived there for a of couple years. It was the SEEK dorm, so people from all of the campuses where there. And it was the kind of hotel that had its own kitchenettes,
which was great. So that you had a roommate, you had a little lounge area, you had a kitchenette, and the phones were out in the hall, just like most dorms in those years, the phone was out in the hall. Whoever was passing by the phone would answer the phone and then walk down the hall and knock on the door. And we had a door mom and uh, the first year was a young woman from Cleveland, Ohio and then the second year it was a couple. She was the door mom, but her husband was there as well.

And so there were 50 girls I think and 50 guys that first year. So the girls were on one floor and the guys were on another floor and we would get together and study together and do all kinds of things. And I started along with my fellow residents at the Alamac hotel. I started a newspaper called “The Paper” and Eugenia Wiltshire worked on that and Jackie Robinson—yes he had the same name as the famous baseball player. He was uh a correspondent on that. And so for the couple years that I was there, we had poetry readings and all kinds of things that we would organize [00:36:00]. You know, of course we would organize parties, but we had the ability to um, encourage each other and if you were a slightly upperclassman you know, to tell people about the experiences that you had had—positive and negative—uh, to that point at college.

Part VIII

“Without the SEEK Program, there never would have been [The] Paper.”

There was an on-campus newspaper called Tech News and it was supposed to be about the things of interest to people in the Engineering Department. But Paul Simms worked on Tech News as a Writer and knew a lot about the newspaper business and wanted to change it—wanted to change Tech News. So I joined Tech News, not being part of the engineering department, Louie Rivera joined Tech News, he also was not part of the engineering department, and Paul who was actually a premed student, um with the three of us we changed Tech News to something that was totally different. And that was about the surrounding area, about Harlem, about what was going on in the world in general, the war in Vietnam, uh prisons, a lot of things that were going on on-campus that could have been improved. The whole debate about African-American and Puerto Rican studies, whether or not there should be a school of that. Of course, we thought there should be a school of black and Puerto Rican studies, so all of these things. Even though the mastheads said Tech News, it was The Paper before it officially changed names. We voted the staff of Tech News out and we voted ourselves in.

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It’s amazing that without the SEEK program there never would have been a Paper, because the three of us who started The Paper, out of those three, two of us were SEEK students. Louis Rivera and I were SEEK students and Paul wasn’t, but he was the mastermind. And I had a conversation with him about this and he said there is no doubt that there wouldn’t have been a Paper if there hadn’t been a SEEK program.

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And the larger connection is that with SEEK being on campus, there was a pool of people from 
which we could draw to work on The Paper. And then those people along with other people who 
are not in the SEEK program um, could all come together and write about the issues that they 
thought were important.

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Tech News was fortunate enough to have Paul working on Tech News. And with things that were 
going on on-campus, we met each other and Louis I already knew, because he was a SEEK 
student along with me, but Paul was not a SEEK student. So the—the process of Tech News 
changing to [00:40:00] The Paper was something that was spearheaded by Paul and Louis and I 
joined in that effort. We did most of the writing with and without bylines. Uh Paul is an 
excellent writer, of course Louis was an excellent writer, and I wrote articles as well and I served 
as copy editor.

Paul handled all of the layout, the travel to the printer—you know, you couldn’t just hit a button 
and send uh the text to the printer with the graphics and everything—but he was a layout wiz. He 
also um as I said, took everything to the publisher and he picked up the newspapers and brought 
them back to campus. We were responsible for everything going into the newspaper. It was a big 
task, but it was a task we loved. We worked around-the-clock—uh every week—we worked 
around-the-clock and then other people joined and this is before the official switch of the name 
from Tech News to The Paper.

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It was an issue every week that came out and we became known on campus as the newspaper to 
read. We were not as storied as Observation Post, but we were very good and we were very well 
received.

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We were basically on our own, in terms of production of the newspaper; we were on our own. 
We didn’t have a faculty advisor, we didn’t have somebody who was saying “You can’t say 
this,” “You [00:42:00] gotta do it this way.” So we invented what we thought would work and it 
worked well. As copy editor, I will go over people’s work, um not trying to change things, just 
bringing up questions and looking for, you know, grammar, syntax, verb agreement and all of 
that—just making it as clean as possible without messing with the heart of the story without 
cleaning it up if it seemed too radical. If it was radical then that was great, just put a period right 
here.

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Working against a deadline on any newspaper is something that’s like the—sword of Damacles, 
you got to get this done. Okay time is up when it’s up, because you have a slot at the publishers 
and that’s your slot and you cannot miss it, otherwise you would miss a week of publishing. So 
we were working around-the-clock um, and enjoying it—exhausted, bleary-eyed, trying to do
our assignments at the same time we’re trying to put out a paper. So we would take a break, you know, hop in Paul’s car, go to an Indian restaurant, get something to eat, come back again, finish up as much as we could and in the meantime as things went on, other people were dropping in and out. And there will be discussions and debates about what to put in the next issue. And sometimes we had so much to say that things would become somewhat condensed.

We were never at a loss for words or topics or passion. It was us, as this solid core, the solid group [00:44:00]. We never argued about anything; we were on the same wavelength and we wanted people to get the information, to talk about the articles. We wanted to spark those conversations about world issues and world events.

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Our audience for Tech News/The Paper was anyone who was on campus who wanted to read about um, these ideas and these positions that we had. We also covered, you know, some general campus things. The President of the college at that time was Marshack, first there was Gallagher—President Gallagher—and then there was President Marshack. And so we would attend their press conferences if they had one, um get information, um report about it and then we would have an editorial about what they said and whether or not we agreed with what they said. We were able to actually have quite a large following, not just um people of color, but also progressives. Remember, this is again, during the um height of the Vietnam War, a lot to be said about that, a lot to be said about poverty in America, um poor people’s March on Washington, um, just so many things. It was a vehicle for us to bring up the discussion or enliven the discussion about equal rights for women, equal pay for women, all of these things. They were very adult subjects. And we also had [00:46:00] classified ads that people wondered well—we had ads, I mean legitimate ads with graphics and everything—but we also have some classified ads and people would say, “Where did you get those classified ads?” We never told them we make them up. We made up the classified ads and they could be pretty wild.

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*The Paper* is still in existence. We thought we might last a few months before we were shutdown, but we were never shutdown and now there have been actually a couple of generations of people who have worked on *The Paper* staff. And we are in the process now of putting together a scholarship in the name of *The Paper*. Uh we wanted to make sure that even though most things have gone electronic that the spirit of *The Paper* continues; that people who work on this school uh, paper can move in all realms of journalism to express their ideas and to again spark conversations about the plight of poor people, of what’s going on in the world concerning black people, women’s issues—which are not just babysitting, but are truly economic uh in nature—and to have a vehicle for their creativity. So we hope that we will be able to raise a lot of money for *The Paper* scholarship and start handing that money out very soon.
Part IX

“I would not have the life I have now if I had not been a SEEK student.”

[00:48:00] And I was working very hard at CBS during college and then afterwards I worked as a researcher/reporter. They created a position for me and it was basically a field producer position. And then after that I moved to um Ghana, West Africa to do my Post-grad degree in Political Anthropology. And when I came back I returned to television after a while and altogether spent about 40 years—mm, about 35 years—being a television producer, director, and writer, and then opening my own business in San Francisco.

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Being a SEEK student and having gone through the rigors of the Pre-Bac program and having people like Toni Cade and Barbara Christian, Addison Gayle, um Betty Ralls, Ann Cook and Dean Ballard, I mean all of those people and many more that I’m sorry I’m not mentioning now, because it would be a long list, it gave us as SEEK students the confidence that we needed, uh nurturing that we needed to move forward, to excel in our classes, to um, know that we had a home base that we could touch if we needed to. You know, you left the cocoon of the Pre-Bac program and then you were in the larger campus where if things did become hostile, uh for me, I just had that one experience, but [00:50:00] other people had other experiences. But that you could go to the SEEK office, express yourself, say what had happened and they would as much as they could make sure that it didn’t happen again in that same way. Uh, you had the support of your fellow students. We were not in competition with each other at any time. If one of us did extremely well, we all celebrated, because we thought that person was an envoy to the larger community. If someone was um, felt disheartened, we tried to give them heart, um because we were the “change generation” pretty much. We were the people that our ancestors had envisioned. And we were making sure that we supported each other as much as we could and we were delighted to do that. And I cannot think of a time when anyone asked me for help that I did not drop what I was doing to help them, because that’s what people did for me, including the SEEK instructors.

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SEEK was a tremendous blessing to me, um, to be able to be in a nurturing environment, discussing real topics, gaining marketable skills. SEEK gave me a platform [00:52:00], a foundation that I could build on and build a life for myself and my family. I had a great career as a television producer, director, and writer. I had the skill and the confidence to move ahead in my life. I made friends for life; uh Eugenia Wiltshire and I, who was—she was in the Alamac Hotel with Marvina White, they were roommates, she is like my sister. She is my son’s auntie. Without the SEEK program I never would have met her, we never would have been friends all of these decades. Paul Sims and I are still great friends and Louis Rivera and I, he would—every now and then he would send me um, you know, a poem or two. A really, really fabulous experience. I would not have the life that I have now if I had not been a SEEK student.
Credits:

Francee Covington: An Oral History of the CCNY 1960s SEEK Program

Special Thanks to Francee Covington

Produced, Directed & Edited by Sean Molloy

“Put Love in” by Linda Draper (2013)
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In 1965, City College launched its “Pre-Bac” program by admitting and supporting 113 poor and working class students who did not qualify under CCNY’s traditional standards (Levy 1965).

Pre-Bac was a huge success. After one year, 72% of its students were still studying at CCNY. Over half had a “C” average or higher (Berger 1966 3).

Renamed “SEEK” in 1966, the program got even better: 85% of the new Fall 1966 and Fall 1967 SEEK students were still studying at CCNY after one year. (Berger 1969 Table 40).

Close to 40% of the 1965 -67 SEEK students would graduate from City College by 1972 (Frost 1972 1).

One of those graduates was Dorothy Eugenia Robinson.

In 1975, Dorothy changed her name to Eugenia Wiltshire.

After graduating, Eugenia worked for WCBS, Channel 13 and other news organizations for two decades as an associate producer, unit manager and associate director. She then traveled to Nigeria for a year to teach broadcast journalism.

Starting in 1991, Eugenia began her second career with Manhattan’s Community School Board 3.

Since 2005, her third career has focused on peace and justice work as well as teaching adult language learners.

**Part I**

“I remember living across from a stone wall…. But behind that stone wall was a college.”

Oddly enough, the first place I ever lived was on Convent Avenue across the street from City College. And I spent the first ten years of my life there [00:02:00] and I remember living across from this stone wall that was much taller than I. You couldn’t look over it, but behind that wall was a college, and I never got to see it, but I knew it was there. But then, I always assumed that I would never go there, because it was too familiar and I didn’t want to go there. It was, it was a very weird kind of experience because it was part of my neighborhood and college meant leaving your neighborhood. So I, I look back upon that now and it’s quite amazing to me and in fact there was something called Lewisohn Stadium on the grounds of the campus and they had the outdoor concerts there and as a child I would go up in the summers and they had gates all around the stadium, but there were certain places where you could go and peak and actually see some of the concerts. I was a child, I would go up there and stand outside the gate and kind of peak and listen and I think my graduating class or the one after was the last to graduate from that stadium because then they tore it down, but that was my first knowledge of City College.
My father was a shipping clerk. He never made very much money in his entire life. He was a very sad man; he seemed defeated. As I look back on it now, I know that he suffered from depression. He was a very kind man and a very loving man, but not ambitious at all. My mother when she got older and I would say she was probably in her 60s when she took some courses to become a nurse’s aide. Someone who took care of older people in hospitals or in their homes.

So, when I was about 10 my family moved from Convent Avenue to the Grant housing projects, because my mother thought that was a step up, little did she know. But we wound up there and I went to a public school, which was a couple of blocks away and my elementary schooling after the second grade, I was in SP classes — special progress, now they call it gifted and talented. So I was always on an accelerated academic track, which I loved. I loved school and elementary school. And um I loved the challenge of it and the experience of it. So I think that kind of fed into the expectation that I would go to college and it wasn’t an imposed expectation, it was just an assumed um track, path that I would take and I was comfortable with that.

But it was P.S. 125 and it was in West Harlem — about 122nd Street off of Amsterdam Avenue. And because I was in the SP classes, these classes were specially configured and so — and very, very integrated. I remember that ah at one point my best friend was Japanese and then there was a kid from China, Argentina, Greece, Norway. There was a Native American in the class for a while. I think somebody from Cuba. There were blacks like myself from, with parents from the south, some from the Caribbean, and it was such a mixture when I take out that class picture now and look at it, it’s amazing — it’s absolutely amazing. But for me it was a wonderful experience because I had that exposure in, as a young kid and I didn’t see myself in that situation as other. And I also appreciated other people for their cultures and for their experiences, and as a class they really played on that. We had something every year called the tasting party and what it was is that the parents of the kids made foods from their native culture and brought them in and it was great; we did this year, after year, after year and the foods and the flavors and the parents came, and it was really wonderful but—. So for me I’ve always felt like a citizen of the world. I never felt confined to one neighborhood, one ethnicity, one way of thinking, one religion— that was just never a part of my consciousness. I was curious and I wanted the exposure, I reveled in it, and it stood me in good stead throughout the rest of my life.

So that great initial multicultural experience was real for me and that was throughout elementary school and then I went to middle school and it continued— that middle school is called Manhattanville and it’s still there. And then I went to high school, which was totally different. It was an integrated high school at the time, in fact it closed after my junior year. I
went to my senior year in another school that had just opened and it’s called Brandeis, but it was the first year and a brand new building of a new school, and um high school — I really didn’t enjoy high school a lot, it ah, because it was more regimented; there was less enrichment I would say. There were, ah— it just didn’t really hold that much interest for me. I was in the debating club. That I liked a lot, because I got to open my mouth and argue I guess, and make a case, I was a fighter, so — but other than that I don’t really have great memories of high school except that I know the teachers liked me. I was always a good girl and teachers liked me and I remember struggling with chemistry. I just could not really get it and uh I failed the Regents, the chemistry Regents, and my teacher felt worse about it than I did, because I knew I didn’t need to graduate and was done, over, I was leaving and— but he was – he said, “you know, you missed it by three points and I went over your paper so many times trying to find those three points.” And I wound up consoling him saying, “it’s okay, it’s not a big deal,” but I could care less. But — so high school was just another passage on my way to what I hoped would be college, what I expected to be college.

Part II
“And to this day, I’m still involved in lots of protests…”

At one point I remember going to… going on a protest march to the south and I was in high school at the time, I think. Because I was a member of an organization called the National Council of the Christians and Jews. And that was my first experience going south, and it was quite interesting to me. Well actually as part of a movement I had gone many, many years earlier as a child to visit relatives, I guess, I don’t really remember much about that except for walking along back roads. But uh going in high school was a pivotal point for me because it was my first experience of being part of an organized group with a mission.

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In terms of the March on Washington, I wanted to go in the worst way, and my mother would not let me go because she was afraid that there would be violence. That was her thing, my mother was always playing it safe and uh —. So she wouldn’t let me go and I was very angry about that, but I think it fueled my activism to the point where I knew that when I was out under her thumb I could make my own choices and do the kind of – engage in the kinds of activities that mattered to me, which I did in short-order, and to this day I’m still involved in lots of protests. I still have the uh, the paper handcuffs that were put on me in front of the White House many years ago protesting.

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But yeah, I felt very uh, very restrained and my mother gave out mixed messages. She was a Martin Luther King Jr. fan. He was the God to her, because he was safe and he was non-violent, and anyone else ah, was just to be scorned. She — oh Malcolm X, God forbid, he was just the most horrible person you can imagine in her mind. And um the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and Stokely Carmichael, Rap Brown, Bobby Seale on and on and on, oh my God horrible, horrible, horrible! And I could never figure out where she was coming from with that, and she had this whole thing of playing it safe, playing it safe. And it took me awhile, but I
finally got that out of my system because there was no gain in that. But I had to overcome that and thank God I did.

**Part III**

*“That was my ticket out”*

[00:14:00] In high school, I had a counselor who um at that time was really paying attention to her students and she was aware of this program called the Pre-Baccalaureate Program, which became SEEK, and presented it to me as a great opportunity and she thought I would be perfect for it and I listened to what she had to say and I agreed, I thought, “oh yes, this is it, this is exactly what I would like to do.”

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I guess if we’re talking about how I got into the SEEK program, in terms of grades and qualifications and all of that, I wasn’t a bad student in high school, in fact, I was a better student in high school than I was in college in some respects, but what really had a serious impact on me was my home situation, it was just very, very stressful. At young age, I guess I was about 10, I had an older sister, half-sister, and she died, and she had six children and three of them came to live with us. So at the age of ten, I went from being an only child to uh a child with other people in the house.

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My mother, she was very controlling and domineering and uh not a very nice person; she treated my father horribly. She treated ah my nieces and nephew, her grandchildren horribly.

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And out of my knowledge of the situation, the guilt that I felt about it, I played the mediator and I tried to fix it [00:16:00] and be the pacifier in all the disputes and all the confusion and it took a toll.

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So, all those years later when it became time for me to go to college, my grades would not have gotten me into the City University. They would have gotten me into other colleges, but then I would have needed a scholarship, and uh we just never investigated that. And even though I grew up knowing that I would go to college and wanting to— it was just totally expected— there was no preparation for it. There was no savings account for me to get to college, so when I was presented with the opportunity of going to the City University as part of a Pre-Bac program, I jumped at it and I said, “yeah, this is great and free yeah, I’m there.”

* * * *

That was my ticket out.
Part IV
“Betty Rawls…. Her approval and encouragement was like an armor…."

When the opportunity was presented to me to go to City College, I was thrilled, but I also knew that it was a highly academic, white school. And it, it seemed like the meshing of a dream to go to college and to go to a good one and it was free. I felt a little intimidated by it, but because the way that the program was presented with all the supports, I felt I could do this.

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I remember registering for classes and getting my books and they had a special process set up for the SEEK students to get books from the bookstore and we were on a separate line from the regular students getting their books, because we didn’t have to pay for ours. So we all lined up and we went into this little room in the back of the bookstore and we got our books, and I walked out with my books and my supplies, and, and once I had a schedule of classes that I was going to take, I was a real college student. And that, it was a wonderful, wonderful feeling, because I was there; it was legitimate, this was really happening to me. And with all the supports that the SEEK program had for us, I always had a resource, someone to go to or talk to, who would answer my questions. So I never felt like I was fending for myself and that was one of the strengths of the program.

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I think the key element in my feeling cared for and not alone was the counselor I had and her name is Betty Rawls, and she was fabulous. I don’t know anybody who could have had any encounter with her who wouldn’t say the same. And for me she was just kind and caring and focused. She was young, she was beautiful, wonderful personality, wonderful smile, she loved to laugh, but so, so caring and I wanted to be her. She was absolutely my idol. And um so with someone like that in your corner, it just makes all the difference in how you— how I proceeded with what I had to do, because I— her self-confidence was infectious I guess. And also I think her approval and her encouragement was like an armor in a way; it gave me what I needed to do what I needed to do— I felt very comfortable.

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I remember having one class, I think it was a history class, and there was a test with questions of course, and when the teacher gave back the exam, I don’t remember what I got on it, but one of the things was that you had to interpret the question and I had never encountered that before and I’m thinking, “what do you mean interpret? This is the question, the question says blah, blah, you answer the question. Why do I have to interpret the question?” that was like a whole new thing for me, and that I think happened maybe in the second year— first or second year that I was there and I was one of the few black students in the class, so I thought, “is this a white thing where you have to figure out what the question is before you can answer it?” Because I
hadn’t experienced that before, it I was, like, oh my God, so that was like a red flag. So, of course I went to Betty with this and she basically talked me through it.

**Part V**

**Friendship in The SEEK dorm:**

“It became a community, in and of itself…. And it was just a blessing.”

Living in the residence hall or the dorm was the next step for me in really being in college, because I now was no longer living at home, and grateful. [00:22:00] And it also was the next step in being an adult and in being responsible for everything that I needed. It was a place to live. They made arrangements for us to have vouchers to eat in restaurants, and it was my go-to place that I could make into what I needed it to be, and I was grateful for that. It was a safe environment; it was in a great location. And um, it became a community in and of itself— how could it not? And it was just a blessing, a true, true blessing for me.

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When I think back about the dorm, one of the people I have to talk about is Francee Covington. I was so intimidated by her. I was afraid of her, because she, as far as I was concerned, had it so together. It appeared to me that she never had a doubt about anything, didn’t second-guess anything, was so committed, and positive, and, and quick with an idea, with a response to something; this woman was just indomitable. And I was envious and fearful at the same time because I just couldn’t imagine how someone at that age could be all that.

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What happened was we both got involved with a program at WCBS-TV [00:24:00] and we became the SEEK interns at the local TV station. She was interested in journalism and writing as I— so, ah I think there were five of us at the time— so through that experience we got to know each other very well. And in fact for a while we were both— I think it was a couple of years— we were on a TV show together called “The Learning Experience,” which came on Saturday afternoons about 2 o’clock, which we all called ghetto prime time. And so our relationship grew and then when the dorm closed and we moved out of the dorms, she and I both got apartments near each other in the Bronx. So this was a relationship that grew over time and I am so grateful for it and for her, because we are great friends now and her son is just— he just hold a place in my heart that I am so glad that he’s there. He’s wonderful, and she’s a wonderful mother and person. But it goes to show because I thought she was this flaming radical that I wanted to be, and uh and she was. And in some ways I think that there’s got to be a point almost where we switched sides and I became this— this, uh more radicalized and as I said when I got arrested, but people have done that so many times more than I ever have— but it’s a relationship that started at City College and I’m really, really grateful for that, so I’m lucky.
Part VI

English classes at City: “I mean, this was just a whole new world.”

[00:26:00] One of the teachers that I remember, ah was Barbara Christian. She was an English teacher; and she was amazing, because 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. They just shared with us their knowledge; that’s how I received it. And, um, with Barbara it’s— I remember once asking her how she knew so much about something and she was I guess surprised at the question, maybe it was a stupid question, but I was just in awe of the amount of knowledge this women had: about literature, about authors that I never heard of, about language. She could go back and forth from literature to poetry and, and it was it was just absolutely amazing. And from her I learned that there was a larger scope to literature and knowledge than I had really ever thought about. I knew fiction, non-fiction, what else? Well, and of course then the black authors and the black poets, and African authors. I mean, this was just a whole new world. So I’ve always been grateful to her for that.

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In terms of a learning experience, yeah she was, she had that great impact on me. And another one was not a SEEK teacher, but her name was [00:28:00] Eve Merriam and she was a writer and I think she mostly wrote, well I know she wrote children stories and short stories. And um I got an A in her course and I remember what I learned from her. I got a lot of encouragement from her and I used to write and write and rewrite until I thought it was perfect and what I learned from her was that you could always do it another time. It can always be better, even when you think it’s perfect. And that stood me in good stead, because ever since that time whenever I write something, I go over it again, and I go over it again; so everything I write in my mind is draft, because I know it can always be made better. And um I learned that from her and I am very grateful, she really just clicked with me.

Part VII

“And the problem was not that I was incapable of learning — she was a bad teacher.”

Interestingly, when I think back on my years at City, there are so many lessons learned that I can now look back upon as life lessons. I had a math teacher at one point, I think I was probably in my junior year, and it was—I don’t even remember the course, and it wasn’t algebra or trig. I’d had those, but it was something along those lines. And I just was not understanding anything she had to say. And I was getting 30s and 40s on the tests, clearly not understanding. And I worked and worked and I just couldn’t get it. [00:30:00] And I went to her at one point and I said, “what happens”— stupid question— but I said to her, “what happens if I don’t pass this course?” hoping she would say, “well you can take something else.” Then she said, you’ll have to repeat it. And a light bulb went on in my head and I just said “hell no, no this is too painful, I’m not doing this again.”

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The night before the final exam, I was living in the residence hall. So I got the big black chalkboard that was there on wheels and I rolled into the lounge, with an eraser, chalk, and my math book. And from about 6 o’clock that night to 12:30, one o’clock the next morning, I taught myself that course. I started at the front of the book—the answers were in the back—and I worked the problems and checked the answers. And when I got the answer right I knew that I knew how to do the problem, and I went through the entire book that night. There was one thing that I couldn’t do, something called reverse fractions; but I figured okay, I was tired, it was late and if that’s the only thing I didn’t know it was fine. So I went in the next day and I took the test and I aced the test. The only thing that I couldn’t do again was this reverse fraction problem, but that was just one problem out of a whole slew of them, so I knew that I aced the test. And I got a D on the course—in the course, and I thought that I at least should’ve gotten a C because I had pretty much aced the test; but that’s not what happened I got a D.

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And what I didn’t know then, which I figured out years later was that this teacher [00:32:00] gave me the D, because I passed the test. But then I thought she didn’t really believe that I took the test. I got somebody to sit in my seat put my name on the paper and take the test; it wasn’t me. Because that was not possible. It wasn’t possible for a student to do that, it certainly wasn’t possible for a black, female student to go from not passing a single test to acing the final—just not possible. And then I thought later—I wish that I had understood that at the time, because I would have gone to that teacher, challenged her on the grade, and said, “I will sit down right now in front of you, give me a problem, from the test — make it up, whatever, I will sit down in front of you and do the problem and get it right and show you.” What that taught me was not to allow what other people think of me to impact in a negative way what I think of me. Not to absorb their negativity and their lack of confidence.

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That was quite an amazing lesson. At the time, what I knew was that I could do it, I could do it. And the problem was not that I was incapable of learning, she was a bad teacher. It wasn’t me.

Part VIII

“SEEK….got me into college. It got me a career. And it got me one stellar friendship.”

I didn’t go to college out of a love for learning. To me, college was a ticket. I knew I wanted a better life than the life that my parents lived, and that was the tool [00:34:00] that I needed to get me there. This, this sheepskin, the BA degree, was what I needed; that would be my ammunition. And really, that’s all I ever wanted out of college; I didn’t have any lofty ideas about being an academic. I knew I was interested in journalism; I wanted to do that. I enjoyed writing; I wanted to do that. And — but in terms of the whole college experience, it was a ticket. And to this day, I view it as that, because there were things that I had to do that I didn’t really—subjects I had to take that I had no interest in. Now that I’ve been out of college so many years, I can choose the courses that I take or the lectures that I attend or whatever, it’s a much different environment.

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When I left City College, I went to WCBS-TV to collect my job as promised as an intern, and I became a researcher for local news. And I did that for maybe a year, a year and a half. The reason I left CBS was because I felt labeled and identified as “the SEEK student”. I don’t know how much of that was real or imagined, but I believed it and I felt that that was going to be a negative label, that I would always be identified as that and therefore not be allowed to move up.

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But when I think about that identification, and um years later in situations where people talked about college, I always said well I went to CCNY, I never said I was a SEEK student.

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It [00:36:00] becomes a question of how to explain it and then we get into the negatives. What did it mean to be a SEEK student? How did you—what did that involve? Well the negatives—uh, I had to be a minority, not qualified, not as good as, needing special help, all of the negatives would have to go into an explanation of how or why I was a SEEK student. Who wants to go through that? Who wants to explain that? And, uh, so I never, never really talked about it much as being a SEEK student. I can talk about it now because I am grateful for the program, and I, I am proud of what it accomplished for me and so many other students— but I had to get to that point. A lot sooner in my life, I wasn’t there and I didn’t want to have to apologize for the fact that I got into the City University “on a pass” quote, unquote. So even though all these years later I can talk about how wonderful SEEK was, for awhile there I wore it as a label and as, it was a negative, and I’m just glad I got beyond that but at the time, no.

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All the things from time to time that I thought of as negatives, I can look back on them now and understand them. And I can explain them to myself with a clearer understanding and a lot more compassion.

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[00:38:00] Looking back on it, I see that SEEK was a wonderful opportunity. It got me into college, it got me a career, and it got me one stellar friendship. And all of those things are tremendous gifts.

Credits:

Eugenia Wiltshire: An Oral History of the CCNY 1960s SEEK Program

Special Thanks to Eugenia Wiltshire

Produced, Directed & Edited by Sean Molloy
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Richard Sterling: An Oral History of Student Life at CCNY, the NYC Writing Project, and Teaching Writing at Open Admissions CUNY (1966 to 1978).

In 1966, Richard Sterling got a second chance at college in CCNY’s night school.

Richard went on to study and teach writing, literacy, and pedagogy at Lehman College, CUNY and UC Berkeley for over 40 years.

Richard co-founded and led the NYC Writing Project, the institute for Literacy Studies, and the Urban Sites Network.

Richard also directed the National Writing Project from 1994 to 2008 — supporting and encouraging the professional development of teachers of writing throughout the United States.

Part I

City College Night Student: “Only in America — another second chance.”

I came to New York in 1963 as an electronics engineer and worked for the Burroughs Corporation which was—which is now I think been swallowed up by Unisys. And while there, I met another Englishman who was also working with engineering, and he told me about City College, and that you could qualify to go there. That you could, uh—that it was open, that it was free, all of which I didn’t [00:02:00] quite believe. But in any case, I went out there and the first thing he asked me for was my high school diploma. Well, I didn’t have one and the reason I didn’t have one is because I left school at 15 and then got an apprenticeship and went to school in the evening for engineering. And so, I made up some story. I said, “Oh I don’t have it but it’s um—oh you know, I’ll get it for you eventually.” So he said, “No problem. We’ll let you come in as a non-matric until you can come here, but then you have to pay $36 a term.” So, I said, “Well alright, well I can manage that.”

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A lot of us were working people who were doing jobs, you know, uh and who would come back to college, like myself older students. I was already um — I was 24 or 25 when I came back. So, I was already a older person, you know, there.

Uh, and the classes were good though. There weren’t—there was nothing second rate about the evening classes. I found them to be as just as exhilarating as the classes I took when I made it into the day division. The students were different; uh they were more exciting in some ways, and less experienced than others the way they are today when you get, when we get transfer students at Berkeley. They’re amazing, you know, they’ve had to fight their way into a top tier university but they’ve got kids or they got jobs and, you know, they’ve had rough rides, a lot of them. And that was true back then in the city.
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So up until then, my schooling had been pretty much a failure; I hadn’t done well in school. Um, I—I knew I wasn’t stupid, you know, and my engineering I passed. I hated it. I didn’t like engineering very much but I forced myself to at least do the minimal amount to get through, but I was never a very good student. [00:04:00]

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And so I went and I started at City College. And I started doing very well. I got on the Dean’s list in the first term. And then, I started getting little scholarships, and still I was a non-matric. And in the end I, you know, they wrote to me and said, “Look, you can matriculate. You’ve got the grade point average here; but we still need your high school diploma.” So, I said, “Well, I think they closed the school,” I said. So, I said, “But I’ll write again.” Anyway, they said, “Alright, we’ll matriculate you.” So, they matriculated me.

So, I let time go on. I just forgot it. I didn’t write for that, of course. And then, I got a call from the Dean of Students to come in to their office. They had written to my high school, and the high school said, “Not only did Sterling not graduate from high school but he was a disruptive influence and we seriously question, um and doubt your judgment in allowing Sterling to attend the university there.” By this time, I was a straight A student and I was doing great.

So they asked me what the real story was so I told them the real story. And the high school in the 1950s in England was pretty brutal and it was tough. I mean I was a grammar school boy, which means I’d passed the exams to get into the better high school but nevertheless, it was—it was awful, it was pretty awful. So, I just in the end, uh after what they meant by disruptive was that I’d led a couple of strikes in the school against what I thought were unfair practices. So, I was not um—I was very hap—they were very happy that I left in the end. But they um—so, they asked me to write up the story, which I did for them, and then they let me stay, and that was it, and I thought, “Ah only in America—another second chance.” So, I was very happy.

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When it came to City College, 1965 I think, was the first in—my first time on the campus. [00:06:00] It was an atmosphere I’d never come across before. First of all, these were students who were very bright, who came from so many different backgrounds—though not all, as we now know. For example, there were these Jewish kids who called themselves Yeshiva Bochers who would be doing a rabbinical degree in the evening and a regular degree during the day. And their entire world was around ideas, and the arguments in the cafeteria, and the classes would spill over into the evening and would go from the cafeteria to a bar to a restaurant. I mean, it never seemed to stop.

So, I was still working as an engineer then, and I asked to be put on the midnight shift so that I could get as much out of all of this as possible and grab my sleep wherever I needed to. The
classes, the courses were amazing. They were small classes. I was never in a class larger than 20/25, because there were only a few auditoriums at City College, so that you couldn’t get a large number of kids into a lot of classes except Psych 1 and PoliSci1 and all of those kinds of things.

So, the classes were small, uh, full of discussion. Uh, now I think back on it, great pedagogy, I mean, where the ideas were presented and you went at them. And I’ve never been in an atmosphere like that before.

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It was uh, you know, that was in the days when City College used to say to new freshmen coming in, you know, “Look to your left, look to your right, only one of you is going to be here in four years.” That was the atmosphere that you went into. Like, “Oh you think this is hard, I’ll just give you something harder.” It was very competitive. And um, [00:08:00] you know, I know a lot of—from a pedagogical point of view, I know how discouraging that was for some students but if you’d fought your way into City College, by that time, you were already one of those types of people for the most part.

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But the expectation of me when I was at City was that, I mean, because I was British and had this accent, they assumed I had been well educated. They—Everybody assumed I’d read everything. I mean, I had read one Shakespeare play when I started at City College, and I’d read that on my own. I mean, I was an appalling high school student. And so, I was scrambling to keep up with these young people who had fairly decent high school education. They’d read a lot more than I have. I mean, you cannot imagine I would go home at night, I’d listen to all of the names, I’d wrote down and go and get books, and I’d read, and read, and read until I was falling asleep.

And so, I was so energized by that atmosphere and that sort of celebration of ideas. Uh, I thought it was the most amazing thing, uh amazing place.

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That was the atmosphere I found and when the inequity struggles began, I saw myself as a natural partner in that. And so, I joined demonstrations. Usually, the—during the height of the—of—in ’68, um the black students excluded white students from those demonstrations in those days. It was a lot of um, discussion about where we belonged, in support of their struggle, of the Hispanic and uh African American students, um but nevertheless, we participated in those.

Uh, I think we had a shutdown every Spring for three years, pretty much. And then, there was damage done. There was a fire set. And then, things got really bad—they really climbed down [00:10:00] but they also made concessions and developed the open admissions program and that was seen as a significant victory.
And then of course there was the anti-Vietnam War movement at the same time. So, there was a lot of diverting, other things going on then. The draft was on. Um I got my draft notice in '67, no '65 I got my draft notice uh as did, you know, hundreds and hundreds of other kids. So, that was another movement on the campus and um, SDS was active, uh Students for Democratic Society. That was the atmosphere and that's why it was so exhilarating. I don’t—I mean I felt as if I didn't sleep for five years. That's how amazing it was.

Part II

Teaching Writing at City College and Lehman: “We were all sort of in the swim of it together.”

Anyway when open admissions began that Fall or that Summer, Mina um recruited a number of the honor students in English to see whether we would be willing to do some tutoring because she anticipated that many of the students coming in would be um, nowhere near up to speed for academic writing. And so we began a series of tutoring classes and [laughs] what happened was that in the end she asked me to take on a section even though I wasn't yet a graduate in English. Though I had, you know, I was a senior, I was an older student, I was already 25/26 then. No, I was close to 30 because I was finishing my degree. I started when I was 26 and then finished it at 30. And so I ended up taking a [00:12:00] section on of these first year, remedial writing students.

I have to tell you I really didn't know what I was doing [laughs] I was really—. And Mina held weekly meetings with us to go over what we could do, what would work, et cetera. She hadn't written a book or anything then. We were all sort of in the swim of it together. And together we devised a whole series of exercises and things like that that we could do with students, how we would work with them in their writing. And that was my introduction to it. Uh, you know, and I graduated the following year.

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Um, now earlier, Mina had been to the Dartmouth conference; but I—that's a hazy part of the word, I don't quite remember, that was before I was teaching. But she'd gone out to a big English conference that involved a lot of people from the UK and from different parts of the US and it was a conference on writing. And it was amazing because it had huge influence going forward. I've got a feeling that Graves from New Hampshire was there—Donald Graves and I think a few other luminaries.

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Um, I got into the Berkeley PhD program, went out there. I hated it [laughs]—and left and came back to Berkl—uh back to New York City and went to see Mina and she said “I have a job for you.” [laughs] And Lehman College was just starting its SEEK program. It was just getting going and they were looking for instructors so I took a job there and that's how I started work at CUNY.
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And uh so it's funny, when Mina came along and started talking about these students who were coming in for the first time whose parents had never been to college before. I did really—I did not only empathize, but I really identified with who these young people were going to be.

[0:14:00] I knew they would be working class, essentially. I knew they would come from backgrounds where they weren't any books in the house as had been in my own case. And so I was very keen to see if we, I could find boys and girls like myself who I thought could make it. And so I was really quite passionate about the idea. And when SEEK came along and the open admissions program came along and I stated working with these young people, I got very excited about it. I thought this is the career for me. This is what I would like to do. I'd like to teach young people like this.

Part III

Learning from Kenneth Bruffee: “A genuine respect for what students know and think and believe....”

[laughs] Ken Bruffee, I doubt he's changed. I've seen him over the years, he's wonderful. Uh he's one of the most generous people. He would always have time for you no matter how busy he is. He would always have you come over to the house. He would always go out and have a meal with you. He was very generous with his time and he was very generous in the—in the sort of the group of CUNY people who were struggling with writing and all of us who would sit around tables and talk and talk, he was always willing to give time to that. He's one of my favorite people in the business. He's quite amazing.

It’s um, it sort of builds on what Mina also talked about, and that is that understanding why students do the things they do. That was the first principle and Mina always pushed that a lot that when students make mistakes, it's not by accident. There's a reason that they're doing what they do. So that was the first thing. The other thing was in actually being um— helping students be reflective about their own learning. I thought that was one of the most powerful lessons that Bruffee talked about and of course Sondra took that work up too very well. [0:16:01]

But Bruffee always made a point of sort of developing meta skills, so that you're never just doing something because this is the practice. But you're always looking at it too and seeing why I'm doing what I'm doing and what are the results of what I do. So it's making you a conscious learner while you're trying to teach others to be conscious learners too and I think that's one of the most powerful things. Also respect, huge respect for students. Not false, not superficial, a genuine respect for what students know and think and believe, and so that was I think, they are the biggest lessons I learned from him.

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So, um, you may know that in the early '70s, there was a uh recession in the country, a result of unemployment. And one of the um—one of the bills passed in Congress—and actually it was a
Lyndon Johnson idea — was called CETA, the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act. And what that did was supplied money to hire young professionals. Not very much money I might add, and during that time you had to put together different projects that would help in the Civil Rights Act implementation and that included first generation college students who were coming in. And so Lehman asked me to put together, um a learning center, writing center.

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I got to know Bruffee's work, especially around peer tutoring and how that worked. And so I got very involved in putting together a center based on the peer tutoring work. It also, we supplemented it with grammar materials and things like that, but it was, I would say partially successful. [0:18:01] Um, some of the work I thought was really good, but I didn't then understand what kind of training you had to give tutors in order for them to be effective. It wasn't a question saying, “Well, you know how to write, so help them with their writing.” It was more complicated than that. You had to actually understand. You had to understand yourself as a writer and how you actually construct writing and that kind of meta-awareness was pretty rare back then. People wrote or they didn't write. They didn't really think much about it and so we had to develop strategies of training for tutors, that was actually more complex and more effective.

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It was sometime before I understood the full complexity of what I was trying to do. Bruffee's work is more sophisticated than it looks on first blush.

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And for myself, I don't think I fully understood, then, what it meant to help students take the knowledge they were acquiring and put it in the shape of the demand of an assignment; to put it in the shape of some cogent thinking that the course demanded that they display.

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And so when I got perfunctory writing, I thought well, maybe my question is wrong or maybe the material is not understood and I think now, when I think back on it, I think it's much more, that I didn't really understand how to formulate good questions. I didn't understand how to raise questions that peeled back the content of the material that they were learning so that a lot of the questions would be superficial and then the results would be superficial from the writing of students. [0:20:05]

In other words, you got what you gave—rather than developing a more sophisticated way of unpacking materials. So that what the students then wrote would come out of a more cogent understanding of the material.
Part IV

The Shaughnessy Circle: “It was completely exhilarating… these were the golden times.”

So Mina organized a group of people that she drew from across CUNY. Um, she was at this point I think at 80th street and it was something called the Instructional Resource Center. And she was in charge of that at 80th street.

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She was uh beautiful, uhh, she was as smart as hell. She came out of some corn fields in Kansas or some unlikely place like that and she was a great spirit. Uh, and, you met her and you just wanted to do what she asked you to do. She was so—she had a real charismatic personality and we miss her still. She had a belief in students and a belief in learning that would cross every domain; nobody was left out in the world that she understood the university should be about. She was so curious about so many different things, what students knew and understood I mean, from worlds that she knew nothing about.

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And she got a group of us together and it consisted of um, John Brereton at Queensborough, McQuade and Lyons at—and Marie Ponsot at Queens, Harvey Weiner at LaGuardia, John Breret— I said John Brereton— Sondra Perl at Hostos, myself at Lehman, and there are about three others, two or three others. [0:22:06]

And she would bring us to the Instructional Resource Center and basically exploit us [laughs] to get us to do work. And one of the things about Mina was that you couldn't really say no to her. She had a way of putting things, even though it was all in addition to our work but all of us were scurrying around doing what she told us to do. And she was— it was something magical about her doing that.

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Okay, so when CAWS was founded the—CUNY Association Writing Supervisors—it was a breath of fresh air for me because here was a group of people who had all been doing similar things to, you know, what I had been up to at Lehman. But you had—it was like a hotbed of ideas around writing and the teaching of writing. It was—it was uh—I would never miss a meeting, even though it was on a, you know, some dismal Wednesday evening at the old graduate center on 42nd street. It was just—[laughs]. But we always got there, we went out and had—we would have a meal sometimes and we'd hang out together and make plans and be ambitious. And one of the things that we did that was really super was that we had an annual conference. And even back then I had a reputation of being good at sort of money issues and sort of building money and finding money, so they put me in charge. I think I was the treasurer for some time and uh I built up a nice pot of money.
I mean it was—back then it was in four figures so it was pretty substantial. And then we mounted the conference at Roosevelt House for many years um or at least it felt like many years, I think it must be at least four or five years. And the conference had amazing sessions. I mean, really it mined the richness of writing programs across CUNY. And if you look back at the agenda, and the uh, program for those times you can see the uh, range.

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But my memory is it was one of the best conferences uh for—uh for teaching writing in the city. And we did that every Spring for several years.

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It was completely exhilarating. It was uh those were the golden times. The discussions were about pedagogy or about research. There were about how do we know what we are doing is making difference. You know, we were all humanities people by and large so we didn’t have the kind of research head that somebody in the social sciences might have um, though we came to recognize that as we went on. And it was—there was n—“What were your students like? Are they different from my students?” “Are Lehman students different from Bronx—uh from uh Brooklyn or Queens?” “What were the demographics? Did that make a difference to the kind of offerings?” “What was your success rate like? What was your dropout rate?” We had all this comparison going on that would help you sort of say, “Well if you are managing to do this, how did you do that?” So we exchanged a lot of information and I think it improved all our programs; there were good ideas from all over. Um and it was very camaraderie—camaradely and we got to— I started going to Four C’s because of CAWS. I started going to the Four C’s conference and I think I was invited to do a session or two with Don McQuade and Brereton and people like that. So it was a real professional group, a professional unit, um and we had a lot of laughs too, so it was really—that was really quite wonderful.

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Then Mina, by that time was already expanding her work and helping other branches of CUNY do its work. And one of the things they asked her to do was to put together uh, a kind of survey of writing programs across CUNY [0:26:00] And she asked me, John Brereton and Sondra Perl to do that work among others, my colleague Don McQuade also, I think was involved in it, he was at Queens then. And so off we went to do this survey and that’s how I met John and Sondra and uh John was at Queensborough Community College and Sondra was at Hostos Community College. And um we did the survey together.

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Well Min—it was Mina’s request that we find out what was going on and then to see to what to what extent they were successful in each of these campuses; how many students were uh, coming out of remediation and succeeding in the college. So she wanted to know well exactly how do these writing programs run and we found huge variation. Ultimately I think CUNY moved
towards a more standardized system and had uh—and the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors I think was influential in pulling together what became the standard tests in this area. But initially, I think Mina just simply wanted to know, well what are those campuses doing; it was a free for all, everybody made up their own mind how to go about doing these things. And so we thought, well there must be some better than others. And Mina wanted to know what the best practices were.

Part V

The Birth of the NYC Writing Project: “simply get the best teachers of writing you can find [and] have them talk together…”

About — it’s about halfway through that project, Mina said she’d like us to apply for a grant, the three of us, uh to study more formally what was happening with these freshman students as they progressed through, through uh the remedial programs in writing. So we put together a proposal and we got funded uh from a group at uh Washington—Washington called the Fund For the Improvement of Post Secondary Education and then we really started working together.

[0:28:06] So, then we were working on this what was called the Writing Development Project. And John, Sondra, and I worked on that for a couple of years. And um, John was already getting, I think, restless, a little restless at Queensborough and he applied and got a job at Wayne State in Detroit. And Sondra got a job at Lehman with me. So, she came to Lehman um and I continued at Lehman, I was still in the SEEK program, she came, I think, into the English department.

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Anyway, while we were there together, before John left, we then applied for another grant to start a writing project from Berkeley. They were expanding the National Writing— it wasn’t called the National Writing Project, but extending— extending the writing project.

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Anyway, we got the grant, it was a massive $20,000. And with that we brought in the first cohort that then became the New York City Writing Project; and Sondra, John and I founded it, directed it for some time on. ‘Cause John went on to Wayne State and so we lost him and then Sondra and I did it for couple of years, few years after that. And then the project just took off in ways that none of us could have anticipated. I mean it was amazing. It grew so fast.

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And there we were in the midst of the highly successful project; we brought in two high school teachers to co-run the writing project, name of uh Marcie Wolfe and Carla Rasha. [0:29:57]

Marcie Wolfe is there still at Lehman college, now running an organization I then formed afterwards called The Institute for Literacy Studies at Lehman and that was when, um uh— and then Sondra started doing uh, more research work. She started teaching at the graduate center,
um an umbrella—she sort of backed away from and did more writing across the curriculum work and other things. Then I then sort of took on the writing project with Carla and Marcie. And uh we developed it from there.

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John, Sondra, and I were presenting at Four C’s… in 1977… Spring… it was in San Francisco. And at the end of our session, it was on writing development, it was the FIPSE grant that we got and so we had some initial results that we presented there. And afterwards these three people came up to us.

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And Jim Grey was a character, small round fellow. And he’d come up and he was very sort of gruff, and he said, “Oh,” he said, “Interesting work.” He said uh, “How would you like to start a writing project?” So, I looked at John and Sondra and we looked at each other and we said, “Well, what is it?” He said, “Well,” he said, “Its easy, you know, we’ll get you a little money,” he said, “And then you um you bring a bunch of teachers together… and they uh talk about writing and they write, that’s it.” [Laughing] So, I looked at John and Sondra and we thought this is the flakiest California idea I’ve ever heard of. This is like typical, we were in San Francisco and this [0:31:45] is what they’re gonna tell you, “Just get teachers together and they just do—.” And I thought to myself this is never gonna work in New York. So— but anyhow there was $20,000 attached to it, including a nice little stipend for John, Sondra and me and a stipend for all the teachers. [0:32:00]

So I said, “Well, alright, we’ll have a go.” I mean, remember—I had not been inside a high school or any other kind of school, K-12, since I was in one. So I didn’t know anything about school teaching. But I did have a question that—that was embedded in this. And that is: Why are these bright young working class kids coming to college without writing skills? What’s going on? And the natural thing is to say, “Well… maybe it’s high school, you know, maybe we should be looking at high schools?” And—and so you know when you’re in an English department or a writing department, you’re not up to do research in public schools, that’s education usually, you know, that’s where they do those things. Anyhow we decided to do the project and we advertised. I can’t even remember how we advertised, but we got oh about 50 teachers, who applied, and out of those we selected 25, as we were told to do. And we were told to do three things: That teachers should be included in the institute if they could demonstrate a successful practice in the teaching of writing. Two: they had to be willing to write, themselves, because the principle is that if you are going to teach writing you should write yourself. And the third thing was to be willing to think about developing workshops for other teachers. That was the model; that was the three parts—writing, demonstrating, teaching of writing, and then be willing to take it further when you got back the following year. So again it sounded pretty flaky to us, it didn’t seem to have any content except what the teachers brought. But of course, that was the genius of it. Because we did select 25 amazing teachers, they knew so much more about teaching than we did. [0:34:04]
And Jim’s—Jim Grey’s vision was simply get the best teachers of writing you can find, have them talk to each other, have them demonstrate good practice, and then form a network out of it. And that’s what we did, that first summer in 1977 or ‘78—no ‘78—‘78. And um it was stunning. Jim Gray came out to visit us that first year.

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Right, so the process that we brought to it was um uh...—was understanding that writing is a recursive process. Understanding that um — that writing... is a—on a spectrum or on a continuum from private notes to public discourse. And that writing has many, many purposes in between and among all of those things. That reflection and developing a meta—uh meta awareness of your writing process is a very powerful way to improve your writing; it is a very powerful way to um, to understand your own thinking. That learning—uh, that writing is different for different people, that not everyone has exactly the same process, some people like to do an outline, some people like to free write, some people—in other words that there were multiple ways in. So all of those are the kinds of things that we brought to it. That a piece of writing that uh—it must have an audience and a purpose and that um—that it is uh—it is more joyful when you formulate your own approach to writing that is more conducive to your style and your approach to writing and that helping you find the best way that you can be a writer is part of what we tried to do in this summer. [0:36:11]

So we give lots of different kinds of writing, um one thing we would do at the beginning is to ask um them to write about themselves as writers or to describe a powerful learning experience. And we got them to think a lot about what made it powerful, so that they became examiners of their own learning, not just as a writer but as a learner. And then we would ask them to compare that approach to the way they teach writing and the way they teach English. So that they would have a basis of making a comparison between themselves as learners and the students that they teach during the year. They are the kinds of conversations and exercises that we would do in the class. In addition, there would be two or three substantive pieces that they would choose of their own choosing. Um it could be about education or needn’t be about education, we didn’t stipulate. Um but after the initial piece of writing we had them do, we would also have them do a piece at the end, often in the form of a letter—which is another form of writing of course. So, um it was rich in that everybody brought this kind of thing; but we would also always ask the participants what they could bring to this too; what did they think was the most successful ways of teaching writing? And then, we asked them why. People usually don’t ask that question though “So why is it successful?” “What’s your theory of action here?” “What kinds of things did you um — did you imagine you were gonna to get as a result?” We also encouraged them to bring student writing to the summer institute of their own students, so they could sort of have a—a solid piece that said, “Look, here’s what students were doing say at this time uh with this um assignment, here is what they did here.” [0:38:04]

Um, we also asked them about assignments that failed...and whether they could interrogate that — the group would do that; “This is why I think it didn’t work,” or, “This is why it did work.” So I would say that Murray— they read Murray, they read Graves, uh they read Emig, though they weren’t too keen on research readings, um— but what we often found — oh and the most important of all... Jim Moffet, teaching the universe of discourse. That was probably one of the
beginning texts and very important for all of us. Um teachers generally thought it was terrible, you know. Though the curriculum book that we also brought for them the K-12 book, which is a wonderful book, many of them came back years later and said it was the most powerful resource they ever had as teachers; it was just brilliant work. So, Jim Moffet’s work was really, really important. And then the last piece I forgot, also forgetting all these other influences—this is an example of the recursive process working—uh was the British work um Jimmy Britten, Nancy Martin, Peter Medway, uh development of writing abilities ac—across the curriculum. All that work was also part of what we would do. We would talk about the difference between transactional writing and what Jimmy Britten called poetic writing, uh which would call more creative writing. And so there was a lot of um—a lot of influences. We would give them a lot of materials to read, I don't think all of them worked very well. I think we tended to overwhelm them with material, initially. But there were a few things I think stuck and um, Grave’s work particularly and Murray's work I think was something that everybody liked. They liked the result of the research but they weren’t too keen on reading it. [0:40:02]

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Then, of course you have to get money for the next year; and it continued and continued and the New York City Writing Project became the largest writing project in the country. Now, of course it is the largest school district too, so that follows on. But we were particularly successful in getting direct funding from the uh, Board Of Education in New York. And one of the reasons we were very successful was because we brought in these two teachers to run the project with us. And it was the—bringing them in that really turned the corner on the project. They also applied for funding, we got more funding from FIPSE to develop the uh— to develop this model. That meant we could offer stipends to teachers to become part of the network. And we got our foot in the door offering workshops in schools.

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And what the next phase was, I thought, “Well how do you protect a project?” A project comes and goes in any university. And so I wanted an umbrella um… structure that would protect the project. So, I thought well I would have an institute, I didn’t really know what it was, it’s a term of art in CUNY—as it is in all universities—they are like organized research units of some kind. So the University uh, Lehman, supported me in developing something called The Institute For Literacy Studies and I put the writing project under that. Um, and at that point I actually started a New York City Math Project, based exactly on the same lines which I got a grant from NSF, The National Science Foundation, to do that. And that’s still flourishing as far as I know. And when I left to go to California to head up the National Writing Project, Marcie Wolfe, the original high school teacher who came into the project, took over the Institute for Literacy Studies and she’s currently there. [0:42:01]
Part VI

The CUNY Testing System: “I don’t know anybody who thought it was a genuine reflection of the learning of students.”

I think what happened with the uh—I’m trying to remember what happened with the CUNY—the WAT test originally. It was an accountability move. One of the things that we were discovering is how expensive remediation is to the university and there was a push back on the funding and there was also talk about the dropout rate being so incredibly high and SEEK programs in particular were examined. Um I think there was a lot more scrutiny of those programs than there was of other things. And so they said, well there’s no accountability in these programs, you know, and so we need a test. I remember it coming about and remember in fact we did all of the—we had to implement the test. I don't know anybody that thought it was a genuine reflection of the learning of students um, but it was a skill they could learn, for the most part, and get through. I don't think it mean—it—it was just a time waster, and annoying. I never felt that we had a choice because we — the status of the SEEK programs uh have— was not very high and there was a lot of talk in the university in the different colleges that, you know, “Who are these students?” and “Are they really college material?” All of that kind of discussion that was going on all the time and we were—in a certain sense, pressured to show that these students could make it and we—and this test came up and I thought to myself—I must say when I saw it I didn't think it had much value, but I didn't think it wasn’t doable, if this was the price we had to pay to keep our funding [0:44:00] and to keep moving. [0:44:02]

I thought that you would—it would be something you would do but then you would teach, then it would be separate, it would be like something you have to devote maybe a week of preparation for. The idea that you would devote or steer your course along the lines of CUNY WAT Test, was appalling and I never would do that and most of the instructors I know didn't do it either. But no doubt that was—there were people who felt this was the way the course should be done now… all around this timed 20-minute test. You know the same testing dilemma is happening in high schools and it has happened everywhere and the best teachers that we worked with in New York City, who were also subject to this rigorous testing business and in other uh—in another realm, just found ways to still teach um, but a lot didn’t; a lot became test prep courses. And I think that was uh an error; I don’t think that it should have been, I don't think it was need—necessary to, but that…. A lot of people might disagree with [0:45:08] me, because it did have a dampening atmosphere on the whole process, but I regarded it as a bureaucratic thing to get around…uh, and to fulfill it in a perfunctory way; but not to steer my course or not to have my course embedded in the preparation of the WAT, which was not very good, to put it mildly.

[Audio Ends][0:45:53]

Credits:

Richard Sterling: An Oral History of Student Life at City College, Co-Founding the NYC Writing Project, and Teaching Writing at CUNY at the Start of Open Admissions
Special Thanks to Professor Richard Sterling

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In the fall of 1970, John Brereton, a graduate student at Rutgers, took a job teaching writing at CUNY’s Queensboro Community College.

Brereton went on to become a composition scholar, writing program administrator, author and historian.

Over his fifty-year career, Brereton has taught at Rutgers, QCC, Lehman, Wayne State, Brandeis, Harvard and U Mass, Boston.

Part I
Moving from Staten Island to “The City.” (1961)

I grew up in Staten Island and I went to St. Peter’s High School where my father went.

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Staten Island at the time—this is the early 60s—was pretty constricting, I think; it had 250,000 people and no bookstore. And I was interested in getting out as soon as I could. My brother did exactly the same three years after me when he got out of St. Peter’s High School and went to college far away. So, I like the idea of being in the city, being in Manhattan, and when I went to Rutgers I was an hour away on the bus. So I took the bus into the city all the time. Um but the idea of being in the city and being—having all these great restaurants available, having the opera, having the ballet, which I discovered at Manhattan College and having theatre um was just terrific [00:02:00].

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Part II
Teaching in the Rutgers Writing Program (1965-1970)

I graduated college in June 1965, and in September 1965, I enrolled at Rutgers. I started teaching right away. I had two sections of freshman composition. One began at 8 o’clock in the morning and the other began like at 11 o’clock in the morning. No preparation.

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I can’t imagine a program today not training its people beforehand, not having what they called “Comp Camp” when I ran the program at Brandeis. Um but that’s what they did at Rutgers. I remember ask—asking the fellow who ran the program saying, “Hey, what am I supposed to do?” And he said, “Look, we can tell you lots of stuff but you’d forget it anyway the first day of class.” And so all right, I began the program. It was an old literature program. We read Conrad’s The Shadow Line, we read Nabokov’s Speak, Memory; we read The Tempest and we read Robert
Frost’s poems. Um there were hour exams and there was a common final exam set by the
director of the program. So, the control of the program was firmly in the hands of the senior
faculty member. And the teaching assistants all met with each other to talk about grading, to talk
about classroom procedures, but we never came up with assignments of our own. So we were
pretty strictly controlled.

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Each of us would give—would take home the exams from somebody else’s section and grade
them in pencil. Then they would be given back to the person who ran the section and he would
grade them and give the final grade. So there will be—there will b—it’s called cross grading.

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The assignments were the thing [00:04:00] that made the course it seems to me. The senior
faculty members who ran the program had all gone to Amherst College and had all gotten PhD’s
at Harvard. And they based their assignments on the program that they had when they were
freshmen at Amherst College or um—or what they did when they taught at Harvard under
Reuben Brower, who ran the Hum 6 program at Harvard and had come from Amherst College.
So this was definitely an Amherst program, at one remove or two remove, depending on how
you count Harvard.

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They were very puzzling assignments. Robin Varnum has written a book about the Amherst
program and it ah—she captures the difficulty of some of those assignments quite well. The map
is not the territory. And if you’re looking at a roadmap, what are the—what are the—what are
you looking at? Are you at just looking at lines on a piece of paper? How are we supposed to
visualize those and translate that into real terrain? Our assignments were not that complex and
that puzzling, but they were nonetheless very, very carefully designed with lots and lots of steps.
So there would be a quotation, for instance, I remember one of the poems on an hour exams and
the exam was on Gerard Manley Hopkins’ “In The Valley of The Elwy,” a poem that I hadn’t
ever seen before in my life until it showed up on the hour exam. And it asked like six questions
about the poem and then invited the students to write an essay based on the answers to those six
questions. It’s a technique that you don’t see much these days except in Bartholomae and
Petrosky’s book, uh Ways of Reading, which is—Bartholomae went to Rutgers and learned a lot
from the program there too.

Um I like the complexity of those assignments. It took the students through them step-by-step
and it [00:06:00] very much influenced me when I write assignments now for the Norton Reader,
which I just finished doing last week. I frequently keep those assignments that we did at Rutgers
in mind.

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So, the atmosphere at Rutgers was heavily biased toward writing about literature and indeed it
turned out to be heavily biased toward writing. And so my colleagues in the—our English
department, TA’s at Rutgers, many of them wound up teaching writing. Don McQuade—one
person—uh Bob Atwan, who was there as well, um taught writing for many years and now edits the Houghton Mifflin series on The Best American Essays, so then a lot of time writing textbooks. Linda Flower, who teaches at Carnegie Mellon University, is a very, very well known writing scholar. Dave Bartholomae is a—uh uh—an extremely well known writing scholar at the University of Pittsburgh. There are others; uh this guy—this guy guy named John Langan whom I never knew at Rutgers, but who got his MA at Rutgers, never finished a PhD and he wrote best-selling books, one of them called English Skills published by McGraw-Hill back in the 70s. And that did extremely well. These are all people who were influenced by the Amherst program as seen through Harvard’s implementation of it and then through Rutgers implementation of that. So it’s a uh it—it was a very, very powerful influence. Pat Bizzell, wh—who teaches at Holy Cross, Bruce Herzberg who teaches at Bentley College, they were also people at Rutgers who, uh were influenced by that program.

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Part III

Teaching in the Basic Skills Department of Queensboro Community College (1970–1977)

So, when I was working on my dissertation, I started looking for a job and I [00:08:00] found one at Queensborough Community College at the City University of New York. Um I didn’t know anything about Queensborough. I went out there for an interview and I liked the people who interviewed me; Lynn Troyka and Jerry Nudelman interviewed me. Um, it turns out that they were hiring 13 new tenure-track assistant professors in something called the Department of Basic Educational Skills, which was set up to be the remedial writing department of Queensborough, not the English department. Okay, I got there. I was making $14,000 a year by the way—full-time. The teaching load was four courses in the Fall and two courses in the Spring, essentially like a three and three. Um you’d meet the students two days a week in class and then have three hours for each class set aside for conferences.

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We were overwhelmed by students at Queensborough. They set up a whole bunch of what we call portables, which were small classroom modules on the side of a hill and maybe there were 20 of them. And—and we each taught in one of those.

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The 13 of us as assistant professors or instructors and assistant professors—I guess you had to get a PhD to become an assistant professor—worked with Lynn Troyka and Jerry Nudelman, who were the preexisting faculty members in the department. Our department was divided into the reading side and the writing side. They hired about nine people in the reading side too, because they had set up a reading course, a remedial reading course, as well as a remedial writing course. The 13 who were hired were almost all local folks from New York, grew up in New York, had degrees from [00:10:00] colleges around New York City. Um, I think that pretty much was a result of the fact that they were hiring at the last minute. They were hiring in the
summer of 1970 to begin in September 1970. They did not go to MLA or anything like that or any national conference. So they just interviewed local folks and hired local folks.

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We were encouraged to use the book that Lynn Troyka and Nudelman had written, a book called *Steps in Composition*, which was pretty much a standard freshman composition book, but it was sort of diluted for basic writing students. We didn’t use the word “basic writing” at the time, we used the word “remedial.” It was not required, but it was strongly recommended and I tried it for a couple of semesters and found it very useful. It was not earth-shattering pedagogy by any means; it essentially had students writing five-paragraph essays and working on their punctuation and grammar. Um, they really needed a jolt of standard written English, because they—their high schools had not provided them with great success in overcoming the issues of writing standards in written English. Um many of the students were English as a Second Language students and we quickly set up special sections of ESL. It’s always difficult getting the right students into the right sections, because many students who were English as a second language students were perfectly fluent in English, others had arrived much more recently, we had a good number of Haitians, for instance, who came, um and Chinese students who came. And those had arrived much more recently and their English really needed intensive work to get them up to the standard [00:12:00]. What was happening at CUNY was that we knew these students would be kicked out if they didn’t succeed in our courses.

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In *Errors and Expectations*, Shaughnessy has a sentence about sitting down in this one urban classroom and reading the papers of these students, first-year students at City College, and realizing that these students were at the 11th hour of their academic lives. Um, that is if they didn’t get better really quickly, they would be out. They wouldn’t be out because there was a CUNY-wide test that was used to sort them. But they would be out because they would fail the first-year writing course (and probably the first-year math course and probably the first-year reading course) and then not maintain a good enough grade point average and so they would be dropped. And that was very evident to us at Queensborough, that these students were there to succeed and if they didn’t succeed they wouldn’t be there anymore.

Now there’s a long history of that in the 20th century in American colleges. Freshman English was always used as the course to uh sort students out and if they couldn’t handle Freshman English they left. I can show people that in the University of Illinois in 1913 and uh colleges in—Indiana University in the ‘40s, Freshman Comp that has always been the—the gateway course and the revolving door is—is usually based on first-year writing courses.

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My course was clearly a part of that, a gateway course. Because we were not in the English department, we were in the basic skills department. And if our students—if we passed our students and then they couldn’t do the writing that they were supposed to in the English department, we would be in trouble as a department or as faculty members [00:14:00]. So, we
were tough graders and many of our students did not succeed in our courses. They could take them again, of course, but the dropout rate was rather high. And I’m sure uh people noticed that at the central headquarters in uh 80th [00:14:16] Street and they—they were quite appalled at the number of students who started the college and did not succeed. And part of the reason they didn’t succeed was because they couldn’t write well.

So our job, as we saw it, was to get those students to write ah well as quickly as possible, not writing in a very sophisticated way, but we wanted them to produce a lot of writing and to produce a lot of Edited American English.

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So, the students in my course were sharp enough to realize that every time they put the pen to the paper or left the pen off, they could make a mistake in Edited American English—in punctuation, in spelling, um in grammar. Therefore many of them didn’t write a whole lot. But my job was to get them to write more, to give more details to become more fluent. So I had to bridge the gap between their reluctance to say something that could get them in trouble and their—the need that I had, and any reader would have, for rich details about their experience or richer arguments to—to—for the students to make about the point—their point of view.

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So there was—there was an inherent conflict between the grammatical side and the fluency side and I’m not sure we ever managed to bridge that. Students were no fools; they knew what—they knew what we were looking for. But they decided—many of them decided, at least, not to say much. And part of our job was to get them to say a lot more [00:16:00].

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Part IV
Composition Research and Publishing at CUNY (1970-1976)

So, it turned out that—that Queensborough Community College was a sort of nest to publishers, because the research we were doing was curriculum research. We wanted our students to succeed and we were trying anything we could think of to help them become better writers. We were—we weren’t satisfied that the old ways were getting them to be—to become successes.

Um so, I guess we—we were trying anything in the classroom and then um talking to publishers about it, the publishers were all in New York in those days, or almost all of them, I think. Scott Foresman was in Chicago and Houghton Mifflin’s in Boston, but the rest were all in New York and they were very interested in this grand experiment that CUNY was involve—involved itself in.

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We were thought to be experts at this stuff and at the same time we did not think we were experts at all. We were trying to experiment. We were trying to figure this stuff out. Um so we were seen as real experts, but we didn’t feel that way when we were actually doing it.

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So, McQuade was doing the same kind of thing at Queens College. People all over the City University were doing things; Bill Herman was doing things, um people were doing things at the City College of New York, Ken Bruffee was doing things in Brooklyn College. There were experiments and textbooks published all over the City University. In fact, I think there were probably more textbooks written at CUNY in this late— in the uh ‘70s than almost any place else, any other single institution in the country [00:18:00].

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So, the assignments we gave our students were mostly drawn from *Steps in Composition*, but there was plenty of development of assignments, new assignments, new approaches to assignments, um and what now would pass for research, going on in my department. Um and that was a direct result of Lynn Troyka and Jerry Nudelman uh urging us to do that. So two of my colleagues, um Lynett (Rynace?) and Judy Kaplan, had a template for writing that they gave to their students. And it was: Most people think “dot, dot, dot,” but I think…—this is 30 years before *They Say, I Say*, but essentially it had some of the same stuff in it. It had the common wisdom and then it had the individual take on that. It wasn’t nearly as developed as Graff and Birkenstein’s book, but it was—it was in that that line of thinking.

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I look back later at that and I see that that was a uh a genuinely rhetorical assignment, asking students to talk about the common wisdom, and then talking about their individual take on the situation. And it was extremely flexible, because it could be used in almost any situation: “Most people think this about abortion,” “Most people think this about pollution,” “Most people think this about X,” and then the student’s own voice coming through with, “‘But I think…’ and here’s why” and the student then of course had to give reasons. So, it essentially led students into both the description of their own thinking and sort—a sort of semi-argumentative piece with good reasons for it.

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Anyway, Lynn’s dissertation topic was based on role-playing in games in Freshman Composition courses. And it later resulted in a book Prentice Hall published called *Taking Action*. And essentially um [00:20:00] she divided up the basic skills faculty into two groups one of which was the experiment group, one of which is the control group. I was in the experiment group. And we used lots of assignments that Lynn came up with that it asks students to take roles and write under the guise of a participant in this um—in this role so they could be responding as members of a survey team, or investigative reporters, and the whole series of things. We spent a lot of time discussing the actual assignments and the results that we got from the assignments,
obviously contributing to Lynn’s dissertation. Um and it was a learning experience for all of us, because we got to talk with each other about what constituted successful writing.

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By the way, that Department of Basic Skills was heavily involved in curricular research, Lynn’s program Mannet and Judy’s program. I wrote a book myself back then called The Plan for Writing. Harvey Weiner started writing his books while he was at Queensborough; he later moved to LaGuardia and began publishing his textbooks. He published a textbook with Chuck Bazerman called uh Writing Skills Handbook and published a whole lot o—a whole slew of books. Harvey was one of the widely—most widely published members of the CUNY faculty, I think, in terms of his textbooks.

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Part V
Moving Beyond Current Traditional Rhetoric, Attending Conferences, and Finding a New Field

I guess if you had to characterize the pedagogy back then at Queensborough and probably most of the other CUNY colleges, it was “current traditional.” But very quickly we became unsatisfied with current traditional. Students weren’t catching on. They weren’t learning it and they weren’t becoming better writers. And so we tried lots and lots of things. So, one person wrote a book called Write Me a Ream, in which she used the closed method of composition and whe—which every third or fourth word was left out and the students had to put in a word. Um Bill Herman was writing—uh was having students write from their own personal experience. We did not use much revision and we did not really think about process until the later 70s. Sondra Perl was one of the first people to bring process to most people’s attention um and her dissertation, which she did at NYU, was on the writing process of six uh students at CUNY. Um I think it was called “Six Writers Writing.” Nancy Sommers was doing work in—with—in her dissertation on process as well. But that—that was not something that we thought of at CUNY in the early ‘70s. We were essentially groping for a solution. We did not know about the people in New Hampshire uh doing—uh doing process and doing a lot of personal experience writing um until later.

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When I look back at what I did at Rutgers and what I did at CUNY, collaborative learning was always a part of it, though the collaborative learning was a lot less rich than I’ve come—I came to learn about later and use later on. Um, I always had my students at Rutgers look at each other’s papers and make some editing changes and I did that at CUNY as well. So we didn’t do any of the really rich rethinking that collaborative learning can help students do now. But I always had students looking at each other’s papers, editing, giving comments, giving feedback. And that’s something I’ve always done and I always will do and I thought that helped the [00:24:00] class become um much more accustomed to asking for help, getting help, making use of others insights.
So, it didn’t take long before we realized that CUNY, many of us at CUNY—that there’s a larger world out there dealing with many of the same issues that we were facing. And it’s a mark that we really didn’t feel like we’re experts and that we wanted to go and learn from others who are facing some of these issues. So, Lynn Troyka urged many of us to go to national conferences and there was money to do that back in ’73. So I went to my first CCCC convention in Cincinnati in 1973 and met lots and lots of people and learned an awful lot about what was going on. I remember meeting Wally Douglas there in ’73 um and Jix Lloyd-Jones.

I went in ‘74 and ‘75, I was chairing a session at 8 o’clock in the morning, on Saturday morning when Mina Shaughnessy was uh talking about a series of film strips that she had devised to teach students Stan—Edited Standard English. Um and that’s when I first got to know Mina pretty well, was at that 8:00 AM session. We had coffee afterwards and we were talking about lots of issues that we were facing. And she impressed me then, and she kept impressing me uh for the next years while she lived, with her brains, with her wit, uh and with her dedication to students.

The other way we did things at CUNY was to have the CUNY Conferences. So we were sent out to go to national conferences like the CCCC and then we had our own CUNY conferences, which were much more in-house, um but we did have outside speakers, I remember Walker Gibson was brought down from the University of Massachusetts [00:26:00] to talk to us. And we would all get the day off and we would all travel to um Manhattan, I believe the—one of the CUNY conferences was held at the Commodore [00:26:08] Hotel, another one was held at the Roosevelt House, um right near the Hunter College campus, I forget where the third one was. And there we would meet colleagues from all over CUNY, who were facing some of the same issues, uh and we would have workshops, develop—devoted to individual problems. So there was a workshop on ESL writing, for instance, uh there was a workshop on um getting students to be more comfortable with individual writing, um there were workshops on grading, there were workshops on getting Edited Standard English.

I think it was the combination of the CUNY conferences and the national conferences that made me say there is really a field here, there is really an awful lot to learn, and made me feel pretty conversant with what was going on. I would be reading the College Composition and Communication and College English and started to dedicate myself to this field, and that was impressive. I said, “This is something I want to spend my career doing, rather than the literature which I’ve been trained for and got my PhD in.” I was just finishing my dissertation in 1973 on Dryden’s political writings, um, which didn’t have much connection to the kind of prose I was seeing from my students. So, there was a bifurcation there; there were two different ways to go:
one was to stick with the literature, the other was to immerse myself much more in writing. And
I decided to go with the writing and—and I’m very glad I did.

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Part VI

The CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors (1974-1978)

[00:28:00] I think it was ’74 or ’75 that I joined the CAWS, The CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors. I’m not sure exactly what my title was a Queensborough that would entitle me to become a member of CAWS, but nobody from Queensborough was attending the meetings and I thought it important to meet other people at CUNY who were involved in some of the same issues I was. We met on Saturday mornings at 9 o’clock in the Graduate Center, which was then at 42nd Street right opposite the New York Public Library. And I guess we met for three hours. Um it was a really terrific group. We had people who later became extremely famous in the world of composition. Chuck Bazerman was there, Dick Larson was there. Don McQuade was there. Uh that’s how I first met Richard Sterling I believe, uh there, um Ken Bruffee was there—Ken Bruffee who had been the Head of CAWS—um Harvey Weiner was there from LaGuardia Community College.

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CAWS had two functions in the time I was there. One was to discuss the nuts and bolts of what’s going on and how things can become better; um hiring issues, um trying to get raises for part-time people, um you know, the usual stuff that, that anybody in a multi-campus situation has to face. But the other side, which I thought was much more interesting, was what I’ve come to call the “invisible university,” because a bunch of us at CAWS decided to set up a reading group and to sit and read some of the major texts in the field. So, we would read Moffett’s *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*, for instance, and discuss that for maybe an hour, Kellogg Hunt’s book on um T-Units, we read. We read very, very widely. We read Jimmy Britton um and his book on um development of writing abilities. These—many of these were cutting-edge research that was just coming out at the time and we felt we needed to know about it.

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I remember in ’77, uh Mina was very, very sick and her book had just come out and the question was, “Well, should we read Mina’s book? Are we able to give Mina’s book a really careful reading? And can we disagree with it when—knowing that she was so sick?” And of course we—we felt we should read it and go through it and give it a very careful reading. And we did and it was very informative for all of us.

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Um usually one of us will be charged with uh the task of leading the discussion, but those were very, very powerful discussions. Dick Larson was an extraordinary um member of this group and so was Chuck Bazerman, um so as Harvey Weiner. And I learned a lot from that interplay with my colleagues—interchange with my colleagues.
Um that’s the kind of graduate training that I think we all lacked in—going into this business and that’s the kind of graduate training, I think—the kind of curriculum that I think students ought to get if they’re going to be teaching writing.

As a result of the reading I did and the conferences I went to, my pedagogy changed a lot. I started having students revise and spent a lot of time with them in conferences about making choices about revision. And it turned out by revising the students’ papers got a lot better. Um little wonder, um but all those years before that I taught, I hadn’t realized that just giving students one shot at a problem without any uh expert advice uh left their papers pretty weak. The second thing I learned—I learned much of this through Sondra Perl and Nancy Sommers—was notions of writing as a process; um that there’s a kind of incubation period, a thinking period, um a writing period, an editing period, a proofreading period uh and many of those can be recursive. So you can write a draft, edit it, then read it over and make changes, and then edit it again. Um it could be an endless loop, but of course with time um things did have an ending. Um but the student writing got much better when I started to understand the writing process as well and incorporated elements of that into my teaching.

Part VII
FIPSE Research and The New York Writing Project (1975-1979)

Growing directly out of CAWS was the fact that Sondra, Richard, and I—it was Richard Sterling, Sondra Perl, and I—um were interested in finding out how students could become better writers, what changed as they became better writers. Do their rhetoric change? Was it just their um surface features? And Mina Shaughnessy encouraged us to apply for a grant, to find out—find out some answers. So we did, we applied for a grant from FIPSE and,— Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, we sent it in and we got funded. I think we get funding for $75,000, which was an impressive amount of money back then—this is in ‘77.

So Sondra, Richard, and I started working on a rather large longitudinal study of students over the first year of college in their—un their writing and taking—trying to collect writing from students at lots of different CUNY campuses.

This was, by the way, right after the city declared bankruptcy and uh “Ford to City: Drop Dead,” everybody remembers that headline. And things were very, very tough. People were laid off; I
think 1,200 full-time faculty were laid off at CUNY. Richard, Sondra, and I fortunately were not. Um but we were—we were all concerned about losing our jobs.

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Anyway, our study um was enlarged by the fact that we received another grant, very small grant—$15,000—from the Bay Area Writing Project to set up the New York City Writing Project and we were going to base that at Lehman College.

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I believe we spent more time on the New York City Writing Project than we did on the FIPSE grant though we really learned at lot with the FIPSE grant as well. Um we found out lots and lots of stuff about how the students were improving as writers. And it turned out that one real marker of the student success in writing was the ability to write more—fluency—and if a student was successful at writing, it usually showed up in his or her fluency. Um the surface features were still problems with them, but the students got into their topics, got into their subjects, and with growing confidence could write more, say more about a particular issue. And they realized that that’s what the teachers wanted and so they provided that.

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It turned out that the tail wound up wagging the dog, because we spent lots and lots of time on the New York City Writing Project—Richard Sterling was in charge of that. And Sondra and I taught in the summer of ’77—um summer of ‘77/ summer of ‘78, I’m not sure which one, uh I think it was summer of ’78, uh that project. And it was a real eye-opener for us and none of us had ever taught high school before and here we had these incredible high school teachers, who were facing many of the exact same problems that we were facing in the colleges, in the community colleges and the four-year college, particularly in the SEEK program, um with very little help, very little curricular help from the uh—the Board of Education and uh very little theoretical underpinnings. And so, we had them do lots and lots of reading with Jimmy Moffett, Jimmy Britton, and we had them read Mina’s book and they benefited tremendously. They didn’t like theory too much, but they saw that a lot of this stuff was really very, very helpful to them uh in their actual teaching.

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Part VIII
Developing a High-Stakes Writing Test at CUNY (1975-1978)

One year Mina came to Richard, Sondra, and myself and asked us if we’d be willing to work on a committee to devise a CUNY wide assessment test. We knew that this was not Mina’s idea. Uh, it was thrust on her by the Central Board of Higher Education and Mina was charged with implementing it. We also knew that if we didn’t come up with a test someone else would, because clearly somebody at the Board of Higher Education wanted that test. So, Mina as the
Dean of Instructional Resources set to work to do that and asked Sondra, Richard, and myself. Uh, and so we did what we could.

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Right away, Richard, Sondra, and I were quite unhappy with the idea that it would be a one-shot test that you’d be um—that it’d be a high-stakes test and it was a pass/fail situation. Um, we were coming to read the work of Ed White, um who was saying back then—this is in the ’70s—that you really need two occasions of writing or you need to revise—re—revision opportunities to really test whether a student could master writing. Um and clearly the CUNY test was not going to allow for that. It was going to be a high-stakes, uh single-shot test um and Richard, and Sondra, and I tried to work out a way to get a revision—a chance for revision—or a way to have two tests rather than a single one. Again we were thinking about those students who were going to be washed out of the City University and clearly that’s what the purpose of this test was going to be; to get rid off the students who are not succeeding at writing. Um and we were very unhappy about the criteria, that was sort of given to us by Mina, and we didn’t have any choice about um how this was going to be uh scored or how it was going to be implemented. We were just told it’s gonna be a one shot test.

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**Part IX**

**Leaving CUNY (1979)**

In ’77 and ’78 and until ’79—June ’79, I was on leave from Queensborough, paid for by the FIPSE grant and was teaching at Lehman College. And my grant was coming to an end and I needed to think about what I was going to do. Was I going to head back to Queensborough? And I found—a job opening came up to run the writing program at Wayne State University in Detroit, and I said I’ll apply for that.

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I was at the MLA convention and I’d just given a paper with Don Hirsch, E.D. Hirsch, in which we disagreed with each other about grading criteria. I had known Hirsch from uh a conference that we pulled together through the FIPSE grant uh at Lehman College. And um I was not impressed by Don Hirsch’s approaches to uh grading and his approaches to thinking about composition and fluency, etcetera, etcetera. Um the people at Wayne State seemed to be impressed that I was on the same panel with Don Hirsch and we got into a disagreement with each other um.

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They were intrigued that I could get some of my students to become better writers. And they—they admitted that they were faced with some of the same issues that we faced at CUNY and just didn’t have the staff to do it. And I made it clear, cause I was that guy if they wanted to improve the quality of student writing. They were also interested in setting up a Ph.D. program in writing
and I told them I would love to help them do that, because I had just come from CAWS and the
work I was doing on reading all these curricular materials, and reading the latest research, and
writing program administration, and in writing. And I knew lots and lots of the books that they
should include in their Ph.D. program.

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And um they hired me at an enormous raise. Um my wife had just had a baby and we had a one-
bedroom apartment in the Upper West Side of Manhattan and we were going to have to move
anyway. So I said, “All right, I’ll move to Detroit,” um realizing, I think at the time, that that was
my goodbye to New York.

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Part X
Being Part of Open Admissions (1970-1979)

In my years at CUNY, I came to feel that I was part of a really big experiment. For the first time
[00:42:00] in American history, the doors of a major American higher education um institution
were open to everybody. And we were trying to teach the people who walked in those doors. We
were not always successful and we were always uh condemned by many of our fellow faculty
members. Some of the language that fellow faculty members at Queensborough—and certainly
at City College—used was just atrocious, was quite offensive.

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And they—the faculty members, particularly in English, did not like that. They wanted students
who represented what they themselves were like when they were in college, rather than this new
breed of students coming from all over the world, um filling the classrooms, and not being able
to write as well as these folks wanted them to.

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I wanted these students to become literate uh just as I had become literate and just as millions of
Americans had become literate. Um I didn’t realize I was part of a huge experiment at the time,
but now I realize I was. Can you make uh people who—students who don’t have the right kinds
of skills, uh skilled at language, in touch with their own feelings, being able to participate in
the—in the world of affairs, successfully? Uh and I felt that I could bring them a good ways
along the way and I—I think I did. They got to read critically, to write carefully and successfully,
to convince people of their ideas, to take their ideas seriously, to take the world of ideas
seriously, um to introduce them to the intellectual life. And I’ve always thought that that’s one of
the most important things a college professor does, is let students into this world of ideas that
matter and allowing them to have their own say about ideas.

Credits:

John Brereton: An Oral History of Teaching Writing at the Rutgers in the 1960s and at
Queensboro Community college in the 1970s.
Special Thanks to Professor John Brereton


Produced, Directed & Edited by Sean Molloy.

“Liberty Road” by Loveshadow & Doxent Zsigmond (2014)

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In 1971, Sondra Perl, a graduate student at NYU, began teaching writing at CUNY’s Hostos Community College.

Perl’s 1975-78 study of Hostos “basic writers” confirmed that they had deep, rich and recursive writing processes.

But premature focus on surface editing interfered with these processes and blocked their writing.

Over her 45-year career as a writing teacher and scholar, Perl has redefined writing, thinking and creating processes as deep, recursive and embodied experiences that we all share.

Part I

“I was curious about teaching, I was curious about how people study, how people learn…”

Sondra Perl: I grew up in New Jersey; I was born in Newark. I am the eldest of four children, two girls and two boys. My dad was a businessman, his first company was a fire alarm company, and we grew up knowing that our father, by selling fire alarms, was actually saving lives.

My mom was a homemaker; she played canasta; she took care of her kids. And I was a happy kid, I enjoyed my life, but I always had a sense there was something outside of the suburbs that I wanted to taste, I wanted to understand.

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And so I chose a college that was in Boston, Simmons College, and I chose it primarily because it was a school for women only and I felt there was something special about studying just with women, and thinking about ideas rather than what I looked like all day. And I wasn’t sure what I wanted to study. I studied a lot of English; I took a lot of English courses; but, I ended up majoring in art history. They asked us to go the Boston Museum of Fine Arts or the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, which is literally adjacent to Simmons College, and to stand in front of the painting for about three hours and write what we saw.

I had no idea that I was learning writing pedagogy at that time in my life. I did not know that I was learning a technique that would turn me into a researcher and a writer by looking directly at what I was seeing and then trying to put it into language, but that was the training I had in Art History.

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I graduated college in 1969 and I wasn’t sure of what I was going to do next. Eventually I thought perhaps I wanted to teach, and since I had always been a reader, I thought about teaching English. So, at first I went to NYU and I started taking courses in the Masters program in Arts and Sciences, which was a very traditional approach to pedagogy and to literature.
It was fine to do that, but I also was curious about teaching. I was curious about how people study, how people learn, and so I went over to the school of that to see what they offered, and I found kindred spirits there. I found Gordon Pradl and John Maher who were just starting their jobs at NYU. It was in a Department of English Education that had been created by Louise Rosenblatt and I felt at home there. I felt as if I could study the questions I had about how people learned in that department. So I switched to an education program and received a Masters in Education in 1972.

**Part II**

*I started to talk with them. And I knew in five minutes, that I was home."

So growing up, I never thought I wanted to be a teacher. I am not sure I had teachers I loved or respected in elementary or high school, and teaching wasn’t something that I thought I wanted to do. Until I went to that program at NYU and they said well, it’s time to student teach. So I said, “okay.” They sent me to a high school on the lower east side, Seward Park High School, which is the school that has a book written about it by Bel Kaufman called “Up The Down Staircase” and there actually were up and down staircases and thousands of kids and if you try to go up the down staircase, you were crushed. So that’s where I was sent and I was very, very, very leery. I didn’t know if I had any skill at all as a teacher and the—my participating teacher in the program said “okay, here is the classroom. Go in and teach.” I did not know what to do, but I looked out and I saw these kids, and I saw their faces, and I saw them sitting at desks, and I opened my mouth and I started to talk with them, and I knew in five minutes that I was home.

**Part III**

So I thought I would be a high school teacher, um, but to become a high school teacher, in those days, you had to have several tests, several licensing requirements to go through. And I was so eager to teach that while I was doing the process to get certified as a high school teacher in New York City, I also realized I could become an adjunct at a college. And so before I received my master’s degree, I applied for adjunct jobs at CUNY, which was hiring. And the first job I was offered was by Lynn Troyka at Queensborough Community College who was hiring me for an adjunct while I was still in my Masters Program. I went away that summer; I actually went to Israel and I lived on a Kibbutz, and I didn’t want to come back and it was such a compelling experience; but I had this job at Queensborough and I so much wanted to teach, that I said I am coming back.

So I came back in August of 1971 and I’m all excited about the course and the books and I’m going to be a teacher at CUNY at Queensborough, when Lynn calls me and says we didn’t get enough enrollment, we can’t hire you. I was—I was heartbroken and she said, “But. I would like to help you, so I recommend that you call all the other CUNY campuses, some of them may have over enrollment and maybe you will get a section that way—and tell them that I’m recommending you.” So I said, “Okay,” and I had a list of every single CUNY campus. I called every single English Department. None of them had a course until I got to the last—last CUNY campus on the list was Eugenio Maria de Hostos Community College in the South Bronx. I had never been to the South Bronx that was the last one. I called them and they said, “We may have
one section overfilling. It’s Monday, Wednesday, Friday from 5:00 to 6:00 o’clock at night and if we have 30 students, we’ll keep it one section; but if we go over 30, we’ll divide it into two and so come on up and let’s see what happens.” I went up those steps I sat in the back of that classroom, praying that enough students would show up to make two sections and that’s what happened. And so I had my first class in the fall of 1971 at Hostos Community College.

**Part III**

“And it seemed to me students either wrote or didn’t write. I wasn’t sure that the pedagogy itself was helping them.”

I received my master’s degree in June of 1972 and then I was hired full time by Hostos as an instructor. At that time, we worked in 10-week modules and they had numbers like 001 and 002, and there was a sequence with behavioral objectives and performance objectives which sound more reminiscent or more like today than in the past, um and we taught writing. At that time, my sense of it was that no one really was sure how to teach writing. It was kind of hit or miss and one of the books we used was Troyka and Nudelman’s *Steps in Composition*. I did whatever I was told to do we tried topic sentences, we tried paragraph development, we did comparison and contrast, we did different modes. Um and it seemed to me students either wrote or didn’t write. I wasn’t sure that the pedagogy itself was helping them; it wasn’t necessarily harming them. But we were trying to figure out, how do you teach students who come to college to learn to write, who actually can’t write when they enter? And it was a big question and something that we all struggled with.

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So while I was teaching at Hostos I also realized that I wanted to continue and pursue a doctorate in English Education. I wanted to continue to work with the professors I had at NYU and I wanted to deepen my understanding of how students learned and what it means to teach. So while I was teaching at Hostos, I also went part time to NYU and began recognizing that what I was doing in the classroom was the ground from which to ask questions about teaching and learning. So very much the kind of work I was doing in my classroom became the fuel for thinking about learning, teaching, pedagogy, and writing.

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The PhD program I was in at NYU was influenced strongly by Louise Rosenblatt, who discussed the transactional theory of reading and how—she was interested in how readers make sense of texts. And she created a program in which we were always asked to think about how we were responding to texts, whether they were literary texts or a student’s writing, and to think about that the black marks on that page are there and it’s what we bring as readers that invest them with meaning. And that, there was a true transaction that happens between readers and texts. And so that notion or that theory sort of fueled all of the pedagogy that I was exposed to at NYU and affected my own teaching not only of writing, but the teaching of literature.

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You know, just as the way my teaching sort of created questions for me to bring back to my doctoral program, what I was reading in the doctoral program helped me frame what I was doing
in the classroom. So the two of them worked amazingly well together and I remember almost everything I read began to be something by which I could now look at the classroom. So when I read Piaget, I began to wonder if students who were better writers had more formal operations, and students who were not as skilled as writers had concrete operations. I kept trying to look at how the theories and the developmental theory and psychology or attitudes about writing would affect how students wrote and I found all of it fascinating. Um, but I realized if I had did a dissertation on Piagetian developmental theory or attitudes—I’d be looking at correlations between one set of factors and student writing. What I really wanted to understand was how students write.

**Part IV**

“these students…did have, and do have composing processes. And they are as rich and full as ours…”

And Emig [00:11:53] had pioneered a methodology by which she observed students composing and asked them also to think out loud [00:12:00] to compose out loud; and that was one of those moments when I read that she was asking the question: “How do 12th graders write?” I understood that that was my question regarding basic writers at CUNY. That as much as we were teaching sentence combining, paragraph development, comparison and contrast essays, we were teaching—we were teaching the form or the product of writing; we weren’t looking at the process and I wanted to understand how do the students who come to CUNY as basic writers go about the process of composing.

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And so once I read Emig [00:12:41] I realized I wanted to design a dissertation that followed to some extent what she had done. I wanted to have case studies um and I wanted to look closely at the students in my classroom. So, I asked for volunteers in my basic writing class at Hostos and ultimately selected five students who would work with me individually outside of class on various kinds of writing assignments and I did ask them to compose out loud. I also had a tape recorder going so I could capture the sound of their composing both the pen moving across the page and the sound of their voice.

You know, some people ask is composing out loud the same as composing silently; does it interfere with the process of composing and one has to admit, no it’s not the same. It could interfere if you are trying to think out loud, while you’re writing. But my students seem to be able to do it without a lot of difficulty. It didn’t make them terribly self-conscious and they talked about what they were doing, while they were doing it.

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One of the most important pieces of the dissertation was to figure out how to make sense of all these composing tapes and the written products. And I could have typed up [00:14:00] a transcript from each student, but I was interested in looking at the process unfolding over time, and so I came up with a coding scheme and I coded what was happening minute by minute as students composed. And, ultimately, I had 4 or 5 composing codes for each student—and I had 5 students—so ultimately I had a lot of data that would show me patterns not just what students did, but how the behaviors repeated and echoed each other or changed and I, in that, was able to
document that students would go back in order to go forward. And in other words, I was able to
document through these composing tapes that the writing process, at least for my students at that
point in time, was recursive.

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So then I asked, “Well if writing is recursive, what is it that students go back to?” And
sometimes they go back to the topic; they keep going back to it to repeat it to get ideas that help
them move forward. Sometimes they re-read; they go back to lines, they’ve already written, in
order to again to hear the rhythm and to move forward and sometimes, I ultimately began to
think that they go back sort of when they get very quiet internally to what I ultimately called a
“felt sense” and those are the behaviors that I thought were productive. But I also saw another set
of behaviors that I thought were counterproductive—that did not help the students move forward
in composing. And that was they would go back and re-read and they would start editing at a
surface level and they would do that to such degree that they would get worn down.

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So it began to be a kind of premature editing in my eyes that circum—circumvented or sort of
short-circuited the composing that they were doing. When people [00:16:00] looked at the drafts
of the basic writers, the kinds of students I was teaching at Hostos and others were teaching at
the other campuses of CUNY, they would look at these drafts and say, “These students do not
know how to write. They don’t have a composing process. This writing is haphazard, it doesn’t
make sense, it’s you know it— full of errors…” And so the conclusion was these students not
only don’t know how to write, they have no such thing as a composing process. And what I was
able to show in my dissertation is that they absolutely do have they did have and they do have
composing processes, and they’re rich and as full as ours in that there is a process they rely on in
order to make sense of the work they are thinking about or writing about.

The difference is there are two different ways that composing works. And when it’s working
well it’s recursive and students go back or writers go back to a felt sense, they go back to a sense
of meaning that they are trying to develop, they go back to ideas and images, that push the
writing forward and generate writing. But other times, particularly for unskilled writers, they go
back to edit before its time t— they even know what they want to say, so they spend an awful lot
of time trying to fix the language at the surface level and they don’t have a fully formed set of
rules to rely on, so they get worn out by trying to fix something they don’t know how to fix and
then they sort of short circuit. And I thought so much that the proc— the reason for this, was that
they had taken in from their teachers a notion that writing has to be correct and they didn’t—
couldn’t sustain letting it be messy or unsure of where they were going, while they were
composing in order to find out where they wanted to go.

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And so I was analyzing the data and trying to figure out what all of these composing tapes meant
in 1975/ [00:18:00] 1976 and I began to speak about the early research in 1977, defended my
dissertation in 1978. And I began to think about what does this say for the classroom.

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And I began to think that our models for writing—looking—trying to teach writing based on the rules for correcting finished products are not the same as guidelines for composing. That enabling writers to find what they want to say and to discover what they want to say is very different from teaching them the rules for editing finished discourse.

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It seemed to me that what we were teaching when we taught writing was the rules for editing finished discourse, rather than engaging in guidelines for composing and that the process movement allowed us to see that writing is a process of discovery and in order to discover what we want to say we have to have a way to engage with what we don’t yet know, to allow room for ideas to emerge and when students were taught only the rules for editing finished prose, they had no access to this other part of what we might want to call now invention.

Part V

“It’s a model where every single person’s voice counts and is respected.”

So what was exiting about CUNY at that time was first of all that we really didn’t know much about how students wrote, we didn’t know a whole lot about the most effective ways to teach writing, and so we gathered together to talk about it and to try to understand what was happening on each campus. And since Hostos was small and I was excited about all these questions, I often went to what we then called CAWS as the representative from Hostos Community College. And it was there that I met senior faculty members, you know, including people I became very close to and worked long and hard with, namely John Brereton and Richard Sterling, but I also came to know the people from Queens College from Don McQuade and Betsy Kaufman and Judith Fischman and met Ken Bruffee and other people around CUNY who were concerned about how to teach writing and excited about the questions.

So I went to CAWS and I met people and we compared notes um and certainly with Mina and Dick Larson guiding us in many of the questions, we understood that there would be funding available to help us to understand writing. And at one point, John Brereton, Richard Sterling, and I wrote a grant for FIPSE [00:20:47] and we decided to look at writing across CUNY. And we came up with sample topics; we asked faculty to assign these topics; we collected the writing, and we wanted to see if we could up with a measure of syntactic maturity and rhetorical maturity. And we had lots of writing samples and we coded them and we spent a fair amount of time trying to an analysis of the products and it was fruitful; it was interesting; we realized that language of basic writers was very complex and couldn’t always be — couldn’t always discover where their maturity showed itself. But at the same time, we received a grant to develop the New York City Writing Project and the three of us were co-directors and while it was a much smaller grant, it provided a much more dynamic playing field. Because we sat that first summer at Lehman College in 1978 in a classroom in Carmen Hall with 25 teachers, K through 12th grade, and we followed a pedagogy that was more or less dictated from Berkeley from the National Writing Project, what was then called [00:22:00] Bay Area Writing Project. And the premises were, first, that writing teachers need to write, and that’s I think a pretty much a common place today, but not in all classrooms, but it was eye opening to think that if you are going to teach writing, you should also be a practitioner.
A second premise was that everyone in the room, the professors included who were writing, would share their writing in small response groups. In 1978, this felt like something that was anathema to us—that writing was private, it was personal; students might hand it into a professor, but sharing writing was not something that people did easily or comfortably. And for us, it sounded a lot like Southern California Hot Tub Culture and we actually said to Jim Gray, “Well you might share writing on the Bay area, or in Northern California, but in New York we don’t do that.” And he looked at us, he looked us in the eye and he said, “If you run a writing project you will.” So much to our great dismay, we, John and I particularly, ran that first summer institute and we wrote with the teachers, and we went to writing groups, and we shared our writing, and that completely changed my pedagogy.

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You know, and it didn’t matter if I was teaching basic writers or students in freshman comp or advanced writing or senior seminar or students in an adult degree program. Having students bring their drafts, not completed pieces, but works in progress to a group, sitting in a small circle and reading their work out loud to me is a key to process pedagogy. And it’s key in part because there is no substitute for looking at your words, reading them out loud, feeling them on your tongue, hearing them in your ear, and getting a sense of your own language. There is no substitute for other people listening to your work and then finding way to give it back to you in a generous way. But more important than that is, it’s a model of a democracy for me. It’s a model where every single person’s voice counts and is respected. And to me that is the emblematic moment of a writing classroom, where people’s voices are respected and honored.

Part VI

“And it never fails to move me.”

So, in 1978, when the writing project was founded at Lehman, I moved from Hostos to Lehman into the Academic Skills Department, which was a department of basic writing. And then a few years later I moved into the English Department.

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When I began to teach at Lehman in 1978, a number of the influences that had worked on me over the past years began to emerge in my practice. Certainly, the writing project was a major influence, but so was process research because I realized I wanted my students to become observers of their own composing. So in our Summer Institute in the writing project, we started process journals. We had teachers writing about their own composing process to see if they could discover their own recursive moves.

The same thing happened in my basic writing class, I wanted my students to understand how they were going about the process of composing, so they could direct it, and they could change it, and they could talk about—their own recursive moves.

So actually my pedagogy began to focus on how we write; what it means to compose and what it means both practically, writing a paper and what it means theoretically: How is it that we make meaning?
* * * * *
The other piece that goes along with that is that ‘how do you respond to someone’s work in progress?’ And I found that first summer in the writing project that teachers became, very easily became critical—as if they were mimicking what their teachers did to them and they could easily take a draft in progress and start saying what was wrong, start saying how they wanted to fix it, and take the focus away from the meaning.

So we began in our project—and then I began in all of my classes—to teach teachers and then students how to listen to a draft as it’s emerging and the simple name for that is “active listening” um, in schools I worked in kids called it "say back.” But it felt very important to me that we learn how to become really good listeners of someone else’s writing, while it’s being formed. And that is a generous and a generative process. And that became a really important part of my pedagogy.

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When I think of CUNY in the 70’s, I think of enormous excitement, I think of the many of the people that—faculty that I admired who were often older than I was but being charged with a sense of mission of questions that we didn’t know the answers to and a general sense of excitement about what we were doing. And it was certainly in my mind led very much by Mina, who was physically beautiful and a bit mysterious. Um, I recall that nobody seemed to know a whole lot about her life. But that when she was at a meeting, you had her full attention and she was articulate, and held I think for all of us, a sort of a position of inspiration that if we could work with her we knew we were fighting the good fight. And I recall my first CCCC’s was in 1976 in Philadelphia and I remember I went to a session where Mina was speaking and again there was the sense of purpose and excitement and I thought to myself I was still—I was at Hostos working, but I was still a graduate student, that this is an amazing field where people are thinking about teaching and learning, and students’ rights, and it was an enormously inspiring time to come to work and it felt as if the world was full of possibility.

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So, it’s hard for me to believe this, but this is actually my 45th year at City University. And I have to say that throughout just about every year when I have entered a classroom, it still feels the way it felt that first time I was a student-teacher at Seward Park, I feel as if I am in a particular kind of home. And I feel it’s my job to welcome each of the students who enters that home for our short period of time together. And it gives me enormous pleasure to be in the classroom. I think I’m sometimes my best self in the classroom; that something emerges, where I really—I don’t have to pretend to be interested in what my students are writing, I am just interested, in what they are writing and what they have to say and what their ideas are. I find their ideas often more interesting than my own. And so other than setting up the classroom, I take great pleasure in creating a setting in which my students are talking to each other, to me, with each other, where there is a new idea that emerges, and we can take it and run with it.
So that there is a kind of openness to intellectual engagement, which is what I think what I was searching for when I, you know, left my family and went to college that there is something about the interplay of ideas that excites me and there is something about fellowship; there’s something about sitting together around a table. That for me is a model of what it means to be part of a community where people are valued. And it never fails to move me and it never fails to give me pleasure. And, so I feel enormously grateful that I kind of fell into the world of teaching writing. And that it has brought me in contact with so many thoughtful, funny, engaging, powerful, exciting, people and I am—I just—it’s just very—it’s been a very meaningful career and I’m very grateful to have had it.

Credits:
Sondra Perl: An Oral History of Teaching Writing at the City University in the 1970s.

Special thanks to Professor Sondra Perl


Produced, Directed & Edited by Sean Molloy

“Liberty Road” by Loveshadow & Doxent Zsigmond (2014)

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In the first year of Open Admissions, Donald McQuade, a new PhD graduate from Rutgers, took a job teaching writing at Queens College.

McQuade soon wrote a book on writing, joined the “Shaughnessy Circle,” and helped to found both CAWS and the WPA.

McQuade has been an educator at CUNY and then at the University of California, Berkeley for over four decades. He has authored nine books. He also served as Berkeley’s Vice Chancellor from 1999 to 2007.

Part I

The 1960s’ Rutgers PhD Program: “the teaching of writing…was an enormously important and dignified activity”

Donald McQuade: Well there wasn’t any particular program at Rutgers that led people to think of themselves as compositionists, because we were all there getting Ph.D.s in English and American Literature. What was different about the program, what was exciting about the program, was the notion that everyone, everyone would take writing seriously—that if you were serious about literature and about reading literature carefully, you would have to take the same seriousness of an approach to reading student writing. So there wasn’t any difference whatsoever between writing, whether it was [00:02:00] Saul Bellow or Thomas Pyncheon or Nabokov or anyone else. It was treated in exactly the same way as student writing was, so there wasn’t a hierarchy in the kinds of writing.

There were weekly, maybe bi-weekly—I don’t remember precisely anymore—staff meetings, and everyone came to those staff meetings. Full professors, associate professors, graduate students—we were all graduate students, and those meetings were extraordinarily productive in terms of the pedagogy that someone learned, because they were rigorous. We all looked at writing, student writing, and the assignments were created in concert with the professorial faculty. So Dick Poirier, who really founded the new version of the English department at Rutgers in the late 60s, and Tom Edwards, and Paul Bertram and Tom Van Laan, and Bob Lyons (who later went to Queens College in City University of New York)—all of those people were working in non-hierarchical relationships with graduate students on teaching and writing.

We read for example, everybody did Shakespeare in their freshmen English courses. We all taught Nabokov’s Speak Memory. Bob Lyons did a book about autobiography as a result of all
of that. The way in which everyone approached the teaching of writing was that it was an enormously important and dignified professional activity. There was no hierarchy separating a graduate student from an instructor. And it wasn’t as though your standing as a professorial member of the English department at Rutgers at that time was dependent on how quickly you could get out of teaching composition. It was a very noble and serious part of everyone’s education [00:04:00].

So we all became interested in it, and we all took it really very, very seriously. And that program produced some of the most important people in the last 30, 40 years in writing circles. David Bartholomae, probably most well-known amongst all of us, Lynda Flower, Jack Brereton [00:04:20] later went to CUNY and then to UMass as – I think they just recently retired. Janice Forman who later went to UCLA and I think has run the writing program at the Anderson School of Business at UCLA for very many years. So it was a place where inquiry and teaching were taken very, very seriously.

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It was an environment where full professors and everyone—along with the graduate students—taught sections of 101 or 102 as they were called at the time. So there was no hierarchy. So Bob Atwan, who later became the editor of the very famous series, Best American Essays and this year one of the judges for the National Book Award. He was teaching freshmen English alongside of his mentor Dick Poirier. I was teaching alongside of Poirier and another person, Paul Bertram. So there was no hierarchy, and the work of being articulate about yourself as you enter a university was very, very serious work. It was taken very, very seriously by everyone and that created a set of circumstances where every graduate student felt that they were in the company of people who were taking the world of inquiry and the world of articulation really very seriously.

Part II

Teaching at the Newark College of Engineering (NJIT): “They were interested in precision and…mechanics.”

[00:06:00] Well, I decided that I needed to find out whether I really wanted to teach literature and whether I wanted to teach writing as my life’s work. So—and I was tired of being a graduate student. So, I accepted a job at what was then called Newark College of Engineering which is now New Jersey Institute of Technology. And I went there to test my assumptions about the importance of what I was doing. And I tried really hard to teach those students to come to terms with ambiguity, and they have no part of it. And then I realized that I’m driving across the bridges that they built, so you could say “well, a quarter of an inch, an eighth of an inch, let’s split the difference.” They can’t do that in their world. And they were working in a world of precision, and I was working in a field which had connotation in it and was more moveable than the fields that they were working in.

So after the first year, I felt—I went there to test myself, and I felt that they had really done a terrific job of challenging me about the importance of what I was doing. And it wasn’t as though
they weren’t at all interested, but they were interested in precision and they were interested in mechanics. They were not interested in the mechanics of articulation or in syntax as much as they were in—as they, just in machinery.

So, I felt that I had answered the questions to my own satisfaction, but maybe not to theirs. And in the subsequent year I went into see the chair of the English department. This was a very different world in terms of employment then. And I said that I would complete the next year, but [00:08:00] that I wouldn’t return after that. And he was sort of taken aback by that, and I said well they’re challenging me in the same kinds of ways, and I felt that I’ve answered those questions for myself, and I really don’t have a lot of time—I don’t want to spend a lot of time arguing with them, because we were operating in different worlds.

So, I started applying for positions. I had not finished my dissertation, and I had completed my orals. And it was my extraordinary wife, Susanne, who supported me emotionally during the time when I—read eight hours almost every day until I took my orals. And I was teaching four courses, two of them were composition courses. And we led a very structured life, and she was enormously supportive.

Part III

Queens College during Open Admissions: “It made and it broke a whole generation of teachers.”

Um, and I went to Queens. I had applied to a number of places, including places here in California, and I decided that I would go to Queens College and accept an offer for two reasons. One, it was the City of—three reasons: one, it was the City University of New York and while I wasn’t a student at CUNY, I had been a student, a college student in New York City. And I wanted to go back to teach myself. What I mean by that is I wanted to go back into the same socioeconomic circumstances that I had come out of, and discovered much to my chagrin that I had grown up in a federal poverty area and my parents would have been utterly aghast at the notion that had been the case, and I never told them that before they died.

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And what happened in the early days of Open Admissions was that it forced all [00:10:00] of us to say “we don’t know what the hell we’re doing.”

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But it was fantastic, because it was exciting, and the kids were partners, and you could be direct about that. But the most important point was that it made and it broke a whole generation of teachers—because so many of the students who were in Open Admissions had never been seen in a university before, and Queens at that time was regarded as the jewel in the City University’s crown—as it was very often described in the press. And there were many faculty who were at Queens because it was regarded as the Harvard of the City University.
And when the students in Open Admissions arrived on the campus, there were many faculty—my revisionist history may suggest that there were mostly older faculty, but I really recall. But there were some faculty who just didn’t want to deal with it anymore and then left, because they felt it—found it was so unsettling not to know who these students were et cetera.

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So, what was really distinctive about the program at Queens was the conditions that Bob Lyons created. He is extremely intelligent, sensitive reader of people as well as texts. And he created a professional environment in which people would want to learn from each other through conversation. So there were regular staff meetings, and one of the most important challenges that we all faced was—and this is in the early days of Open Admissions—what was it that students could reasonably understand was going to be expected of them in terms of their performances [00:12:00] as writers at the end of the semester.

And we spent two years—minimum—meeting on a probably monthly basis. I don’t really remember how often we met—arguing about, talking about, writing and reading, and then writing about expectations. What was it that a student could reasonably expect that he or she would be required to know at the end of a semester? And those conversations were just fabulous because they always had something concrete about them. They were not conversations that were self-indulgent discussions of some theoretical context. It was always going to be measured against what was going to be the delivery system, what were the circumstances that we were going to be able to create that would enable these students to be articulate in ways that were important to them.

So, those conversations which featured Marie Ponsot, Rosemary Deen, later Bob DiYanni when, after I succeeded Bob [Lyons] as the director of the writing program, John Clifford. Many of these people went out and ran writing programs all over the country. It was an enterprise that Bob had created; he had created the conditions for success. And there was this department-wide interest in writing and teaching writing in a way that was somewhat comparable to Rutgers, but didn’t have the same kind of widespread interest on the part of all of the faculty, because there were some faculty who really weren’t interested in teaching students to write and who resisted at all [00:14:00] costs. But those conversations and the conditions that Bob Lyons created both professionally and pedagogically were of signal importance….

Part IV

Bob Lyons’ pedagogy at Queens College: “By the end of the semester… [students] were asking to read Henry James.”

So there was the notion of the City University, there was the notion of going back to New York, there was also another—very, very important factor—and that was that Bob Lyons had left Rutgers. And he was running the writing program for the several years I was a graduate student [at Rutgers], and Queens had recruited him to set up a first-rate writing program at Queens College. And I had spent a lot of time with him in those days. (I mean I don’t see them [Bob and his wife Bridget Gellert Lyons] very much—because they’re [living] in New York. But I
established a lifelong friendship with him. And he was part of the reason that I went there [to Queens College].

And that reason was that he had worked on a book [with Thomas VanLaan] at Rutgers called Language and the Newsstand. And the idea was that you would treat any text as respectfully and as an opportunity to learn from that text—about language and how to use it effectively. There was no hierarchy between a classic work of literature—say, Faulkner or Wallace Stevens, or poetry or prose—whatever it might be and something that was a Kung Fu ad that appeared in a muscle magazine. And that each of these texts was an opportunity for people to learn.

The program that was in place at Rutgers, which Bob Lyons basically adapted into the circumstances of Open Admissions was based on this very fundamental [00:16:00] principle—which is that the principle Wittgenstein made—which is the limits of my world or the limits of my language. And the attention that was always being paid was: so what does this mean when you say this? When you write this, what are the consequences of this? So it was a pedagogy that was based on the word of that decade and probably subsequent decades—which was to try to give people power over their own articulateness. To help them, to get them to really be truly articulate in ways that would matter to them, that if they wanted to participate in particular communities that they belong to, or they aspired to, they needed to be articulate. They needed to be able to articulate their position in the world in a way that would be understandable to others.

So it wasn’t as though it was a program, pedagogically, that was based on rhetorical models, but rhetoric was deeply built into it. But it was always situational, it was always relational. It was really based more on William James than on anything that had to do with classical rhetoric. It was a program which asked you to think about where you were, what you wanted to say or write in that context, in that community, and then to enable you to practice it so that you will be more confident and more accomplished and more articulate about the states of consciousness that you valued.

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And out of my association with Language and the Newsstand came a book that Bob Atwan and I did which was called Popular Writing in America, which we did in 1972 perhaps or 1973 (I don’t remember), which is still in print. And it [Popular Writing in America] took that pedagogy [00:18:00] and it created a structured arrangement where [students] start with language as public property—which is language in advertising—and then you move to newspapers and then you move to magazines and then you move to best sellers and then classic works of literature. So the idea is that there is a widening sense of audience. It was called, the subtitle was “The Interactions of Style and Audience.”

So language is public property all the way down to the last section it was called Classics, and it was Classic American Literature. So, I was teaching—trying to teach—Hawthorne’s short stories and the students in those early days in Open Admissions weren’t interested in reading it. But when I started with advertising and moved them through newspapers and magazines and then took them to Hawthorne, they were very, very interested in reading it. And at the end of the
semester they were reading Henry James. They were asking to read Henry James in the first year or so that I was at Queens College!

Part V

“We did not hire adjuncts.”

Here is one aspect of it. We did not hire adjuncts until the day I left Queens which was in 1986 I think. (Yeah, I came here to Berkley in January of ‘86.) We never hired an adjunct [at Queens College; we hired only Graduate Fellows We paid them more to teach the courses—the two courses that each of them taught. We treated them professionally. We did not treat them in the way in which adjuncts were treated—much in the way that what I called here “Freeway Flyers”—people teaching four, five, six courses all over the Bay Area for really substandard wages. We brought them in, we chose them on the [00:20:00] qualities of their teaching, not on their performance as graduate students, and we created a set of circumstances where they would take this work seriously and then they would make themselves more employable.

We had people from Columbia very often, we had people from Rutgers, graduate students, from NYU, from Fordham. We had graduate students from Yale; we even had people flying down to teach from Harvard, because they recognized that if [they] were going to be competitive in the job market that [they] really needed to be serious about the teaching of writing. And as a result of that [policy], we had our choice of the very best graduate students in the greater New York area, and our reach was pretty wide.

I don’t remember anybody coming up from Penn, from Philadelphia, but we had a couple of people come down from Harvard. And the circumstances—all of which depended on the environment that Bob Lyons created—was one in which we said this is serious work; we’re going to do it in a first-rate way, and we’re going to support you to the fullest extent possible. It [Queens College] was not some place where people were working simply to support themselves (although of course they were doing that), but we were paying them more, and we were trying to treat them more professionally than any other place in the New York, greater New York area.

Part VI

“You start where students are able.”

So one of the principles that surfaced—and I can’t tell you whether it’s original with me or not, I just can’t tell you that, but it certainly emerged there [at Queens College] was the pedagogical principle is: you start where students are able. And that requires you to know who your students are, where they come from, what their backgrounds are with reading and writing, and then you need to [00:22:00] start where they are able.

So it was perfect for the pedagogy of Language and the Newsstand and in Popular Writing in America, because they [the Open Admissions students] were all reading and they could tell you funny stories about [Mario Puzo’s] The Godfather and [Eric Segal’s] Love Story in 1972. Those were the best sellers then. But to focus on the pedagogy, the idea was you start were people are
able. Everybody at that time were still reading newspapers (that’s no longer the case), but at that time they were. So if you created a set of circumstances, you were starting with how they were trying to articulate themselves in relation to whatever was around them and that’s a process of inquiry.

So the notion of a five-paragraph theme, five-paragraph essay seemed to us—to most of us, I can’t speak for everybody, but certainly for those of us who had some responsibility—seemed off the wall, because that means if you’re writing for a structure that’s been created for someone else, you’re not learning to internalize structure. And if you internalize the structure, you will find your way through writing and rewriting. And out of that rose one of the most influential books of all which was *Beat Not the Poor Desk*, which was published by Boynton & Cook, which at that time was really the kind of hot shop of publishing for composition. It was a book that Marie Ponsot and Rosemary Deen developed and articulated.

It was, I think, the winner of the first Mina Shaughnessy prize ever awarded [by the MLA]. It was a book which identified the teachable skills, and asked why are we wasting our time teaching rhetorical models that 90% of the time students are not going to be using? Why are they writing to fulfill [00:24:00] the requirements of the model as opposed to driving a model toward expressing what it is that they want to express?

One of the teachable skills is rewriting; [another is] rereading. Grammar is not a skill; it’s information; it’s social convention. And what we did was [to say to students] you will learn grammar along the way because you’re becoming successful in articulating yourself as opposed to learning grammar first and then moving into trying to articulate yourself.

So I wrote a long piece about it. And I have always thought that the way in which composition has been thought in English departments—including this one—has been ass backwards. That is, what you have to do is you have to demonstrate that you are literate before you’re released into reading literature. Whereas every one of those students who came to our classes in Open Admissions or every student who comes to Berkeley—what they do is that they have an exquisite (in most cases) tradition of literature in their family’s lives, because narrative is a substantial part of every family’s life. And yet they think they have to check that literary sense at the door. Here is a different version of it: I’m married to a Swiss. My wife automatically speaks five or six languages. (By the way it’s really annoying!) But nonetheless, I had—I took four, six—years of French and I would think of grammar first. So I would be in a bar—let’s say in Paris—and I would say it [the phrase or sentence] in English, and then I would translate it to myself in French. And then I would practice, and then I would go to say it, and the person who is sitting next to me had already left the bar. So if you reach for fluency [00:26:00] before correctness, you will be more interested in writing. But if [instructors] impose limitations and if [they] funnel writers into particular structures that have a demonstrated pedagogical purpose for the convenience of instructors, for institutional conveniences, [they] will not see that high of a percentage of those people continuing to write—because in those cases they are writing to fulfill the expectations of others rather than being driven by their deep human impulse to want to articulate themselves.
And that was at the heart of what we were doing at Queens, because it was the notion that we were seeing people who had never been in a university before. And no one knew who they were. No one knew how to teach them. I learned how to teach, you know, in the mythical coffee room, in the corridor, in sitting around at lunch, listening to people, older faculty talk about what they were doing. So there was a very spirited community of inquiry that I was privileged to be a part of. And as a young faculty member, I listened, mouth agape most of the time—because I was about to do what somebody had just come back and told us had been a disaster. So you have to find out who they are, you need to find out where they can start, and then you should as a matter of ethics start where people are able. That was a very fundamental principle. So if you look at Beat Not the Poor Desk, the structures that are there are structures of curses, of fables, of different traditional structures that every family has as part of their collective consciousness, if you will.

And that’s what Ponsot and Deen were brilliant at, and the people who were part of this community were really—it was a community of inquiry, because no one had a copyright on saying who these students were or what they could do. So we were constantly in conversation with each other, talking about swapping stories, talking about what worked, and what didn’t work in our classes.

You know, here is a maxim: talking about teaching is like talking about your bathroom habits. It’s a very private matter for most faculty, and it’s awkward and embarrassing that we don’t talk publicly about what our pedagogy is. I close the door in my lecture courses or in my seminar that I’m teaching right now, and that’s a private space. It shouldn’t be a private space; it should be a public space, a space of public inquiry.

Part VII

Mina Shaughnessy: “She was this spectacular presence…."

So, this notion of not knowing what you were doing was very energizing. It wasn’t depressing; it was trying to figure out “okay, so what do we do?” And along comes the great Mina Shaughnessy, who summoned people to the Graduate Center at the City University of New York—when it was still on 42nd Street. And she was at City College before she went to 80th Street, to the Headquarters of—CUNY’s Headquarters.

And she created this spectacular presence, incredibly smart, as imposing a presence personally and socially as she was intellectually—gorgeous, chiseled face and spectacular person who was really kick-ass smart. I mean she was really smart. And she gathered people one-by-one, so there will probably be many people who claimed that they were the first ones in the door, but it doesn’t matter. I mean I don’t remember who was, but there were bunch of us and certainly it would have been Bob Lyons at Queens. She would have—she was running the writing program at City College is my recollection. So she would have contacted Bob first and then Bob would say “well, why don’t you come along and meet with this Mina Shaughnessy person?” and so that’s how I first came into her “circle.”
I don’t think that she summoned me, but probably said to Bob, “So we need some more people from Queens,” so we knew each other well and I was working with him pretty closely. So that’s probably the reality, although I have a fictional version of that probably about how it happened: that I was summoned by Mina. But that’s probably not literally how it happened. And we would meet once a month on a Saturday morning, and it was Ken Bruffee, and it was Bob Lyons and Richard Sterling, and Janet Emig, who was at then at Rutgers and eventually invited into the group. And there were people from Lehman [College] and from Hunter and from Baruch College and LaGuardia who were also part of it. But those people sort of drifted in and out, but there was a kind of core group and we traveled together.

And we traveled together. We would go to CCCC together, because she [Mina] was so serious about this [work]. She would say “Well, we need be up-to-date; we need to know what’s going on in the rest of the country. So we’re all going to go to CCCC, which [00:32:00] we did. At one of them [CCCC]—that I remember very vividly was in New Orleans and that was the place and the story that I told you earlier where she [Mina] told me about my own writing and what I needed to do, which was to get up at 4 O’clock in the morning and do that writing then so that I could complete work for myself and then move through all the bureaucratic stuff that I had to do all during the day and I wouldn’t be fazed by it. And then when I came home at night, I could give my life over to my kids in a way that will be good for them, let’s presume, and great for my family life. And she [Mina] had a profound impact on me personally in that respect.

Here is what would happen at CCCC. She would assign people. “Well, I heard about this guy Sean Molloy. I mean he is really pretty important young guy. He is really doing interesting work. Don, you need to go to that session, check him out. Bob, I think you should go to see whoever it was. Ken Bruffee, you should do this.”

Bruffee listened to her so much—well you have to check with Ken Bruffee if this story is accurate. He was very interested in group dynamics, and she [Mina] said to him, I believe in my presence, but I may be revisionist. “Well, if you’re serious about this, you should go and get a degree in it.” So he went to Columbia and got a Masters in Social Work. So all of Bruffee’s stuff about small groups has a very substantial pedagogical base, but it also has a very, very strong theoretical base, and he educated himself about that.

And she would expect us to come and talk about what we were reading, and we would say “Okay, well, you should be reading X or you should be reading Y, all of which were not necessarily focused specifically on composition, but were—what were in the—[00:34:00] what was the zone of proximate meaning, right? It doesn’t matter where the phrase is found, but what’s the area that we can learn and educate ourselves from. So we started reading around in social theory. Well, I was particularly interested in class issues, so I read Sennett and Cobb, The Hidden Injuries of Class as well as The Working Class Majority.

There were all these books that were coming out of NYU about the impact of class on culture, and we were just simply taking those texts and saying “Well, that could really be helpful if we read that, so why don’t we read Sennett and Cobb? Hidden Injuries of Class was the book. That was the first of these books that I was encouraged to report on, and that had a huge impact on me. And Sennett is still around—I mean he is still writing although he now commutes between
Paris and New York. So it was a reading group; it was a group that was focused on pedagogy, but it was kick-ass serious. It was really serious. And if you were not serious, you were not really encouraged to return.

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It’s hard to describe her—because she was a kind of towering presence over all those conversations. There wasn’t a scripted agenda that I could ever remember, but we would just get together, and a subject would come up—mostly that she would bring up. And we were all members of a kind of intellectual orchestra. And she was the conductor, and of course she was also the first violinist, and she was the percussionist at the same time—she would start beating the drum. And you would say “OK, all right, where are we going? what are we going to do?” And she always had an intellectual agenda, and it was an agenda that was about inquiry, about “how can we make ourselves smarter about this? What can we learn? We have a profound public responsibility as educators to create the conditions were any person who was interested in learning could learn.” And that required us to know more about who those students were, but it also required us to know more about what were the fields that were out there that could support this kind of inquiry.

So she was—well I don’t know—metaphorically a raider of the lost ark. . . . Who knows? I mean she was willing to go anywhere and to inquire about whether there was something there intellectually that could help us do our work more professionally—but that’s really not the primary reason. It was really more to get us to think about how we could be more successful in helping others to articulate their own place in the world and what was important to them in their own consciousness.

So she would take a subject that would come up, and she would unfurl it, she would open it up and enable us to see dimensions of it. And then when it was unfolded like that, each of us would probably choose some aspect of it. And then would come back and talk a little bit more about that particular aspect. [00:38:00] And I can’t recall specifically whether she assigned us those particular roles or whether we moved to take them. I just don’t remember. But there was a choreography, there was an orchestration, to mix the metaphor. There were efforts that required somebody to bring it all together, and she was that person.

Part VIII

Shaughnessy’s 1975 Diving In Speech: “It rocked that room and… it rocked the boat forever in MLA.”

Mina decided to go public, if you will, to make a big statement about writing at MLA. Because MLA for many, many years felt that writing was déclassé. It was not taken seriously. This was—MLA was a double-dome organization. It was much more interested in what were the beginnings of theory. Teaching and writing were—well let me put it in a different way: your professional standing would depend on how quickly you got out of teaching Freshman English and that was completely antithetical to what our operative principles were and our beliefs were, although all of us in this first generation of WPA people or CAWS people—we all were straight
Ph.D.s in literature. We were not compositionists in the way that there are now, and the field had no standing at that time.

The CCC’s journal wasn’t refereed, and it had no standing for tenure.…

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And Mina blew that up in 1975. She stood [00:40:00] up in the chandeliered expanses of some downtown San Francisco hotel, probably the Hilton. I don’t remember. And she took MLA to task and said this [composition studies] is very serious work. And it rocked that room and—to mix the metaphor—it rocked the boat forever in MLA.

* * * * *

What it did was, it was more than calling our colleagues to task for really thinking of writing as a service course, something that they should see themselves getting out of, but as a deep and profound ethical responsibility.

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But the metaphor that you’re guarding the gates, or, if you remember the point that I had made earlier about you have to demonstrate that you’re literate before we’ll let you read literature, are precisely these issues. And what she was suggesting was—and it’s really deeply related to Open Admissions—because the idea was that no [students] like this had been seen in the university before Open Admissions. And what did that mean? And then so it was going to be—people were going to be—would have access then. What did that do to the traditions and the standards that were in place with respect to literature? So what she was saying, in effect, was a principle that I deeply believe—which is that faculty want everyone to change but themselves, and that’s a problem. And what she was saying [00:42:00] in that speech was: it’s time for all of us who are in this community to take this work very, very seriously.

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And English departments historically have treated the writing program as the necessary other to valorize the teaching of literature. And keeping writing in their purview and its being identified as a service course rather than as the most fundamental course that every university student should take, just as they should have mathematical skills and be able to practice those skills (or as I would say now they should be able to have coding skills). That was what Mina was attacking [in her “Diving In” speech sat MLA In 1975], and she made a profoundly compelling case for that work.
Part IX

Kenneth Bruffee: “He was really serious about his work.”

Ken Bruffee did not suffer fools gladly, and he was really serious about his work. And if you were not serious, he wasn’t interested. So he was so serious that—as I’ve already mentioned—he went off to Columbia and got a degree in group work, because he wanted to study the theory and practice of social work. So all of the small-group theory and practice that he developed came out of a very textured and deep study. He was always really serious. And he believed that if you were serious you were not out on the road a lot; you were doing your work, and you were doing that work at home.

And he became something (how would I say it?) he became—he was regarded—I don’t know what the right word is, he was regarded as kind of reclusive, because while we had access to him all the time, and we were very friendly, personally, socially—he didn’t like to go to conferences because he thought there was just a lot of—what is it, falderal—or there is a lot of fluff at those things [conventions], and he didn’t have a high tolerance for bullshit, and he wasn’t interested in that. And just chatting and social stuff, I mean social activity. He was kind of ironic, because he was a guy writing both group work. And I can’t think of the right word, it wasn’t reclusive, but he was reluctant, (how about that?) he was reluctant to participate in all of that, because he didn’t think it was going to be yield very much and he was super serious.

So when he would come to a conference, it was like “Oh my God, Ken Bruffee is here”—in the conference. So it was really quite wonderful, because he was treated as he should have been treated, as somebody who had really important things to say. So in those years, I mean, I don’t know, I went to CCCC for like 37 years in a row or something like that, I don’t remember, but for many, many years I was always there. And when he showed up that room was packed.

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But he had a very substantial impact on me, and I could point to books on this wall right here that were books that he told me to read and that I read because he told me to read them.

Part X

CAWS: “a kind of swap meet about what we were doing….”

One of the outgrowths of what later became known as “The Shaughnessy Circle,” a phrase in my judgment that Elaine Maimon first articulated. One of the outgrowths of that was CAWS, the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors. And that was probably (and we could look it up), I actually probably have right in my files here some of the early documents from CAWS—because I took all that with me from New York. It was an outgrowth of the Shaughnessy Circle, but it was an effort to bring all the writing program directors from the two and four-year colleges in the City University together and to do a kind of swap meet about what we were doing and to
try to coordinate. And Mina had already moved to 80th Street as the coordinator of these basic skills enterprises. And these programs

And my recollection is that Harvey Weiner emerged pretty quickly as the leader of that organization, of CAWS. He had been at LaGuardia Community College; he had been an New York City High School teacher, had published a number of books, and he was a high voltage, high wattage guy who really saw the benefits to everybody both professionally for us [00:48:00] and also for students of bringing the program directors together. And there was a CAWS conference. I don’t remember, but I could look at up as Casey Stengel [00:48:10] used to say, it may have been once a semester or it was once a year, I just don’t remember anymore. But I have folders in my—in that file cabinet there that will point to it.

And it was not only the writing program directors at each of the campuses, but also faculty from those campuses and we had a day-long conference. Most often they were at City College, that’s the place that I remember most, but also at Hunter, so that it would be sort of more convenient for people transportation-wise. And that program was very vigorous; Jack Brereton was the Director of the Writing Program at Queensborough Community College; Ken Bruffee was at Brooklyn, and by then I was the Director of the Writing Program succeeding Bob, although Bob Lyons was still very active. But I was the Director of the Writing Program. Sondra Perl and Richard [Sterling] and I mentioned Jack Brereton—there were lots of people who were part of that.

Part XI

The WPA: “We wanted to create a network nationally of writing program directors….”

So the WPA was started principally by Ken Bruffee (Brooklyn College) and Elaine Maimon at Beaver College [now Arcadia University]. I was in those conversations from Queens. Harvey was involved in those conversations—Harvey Weiner from LaGuardia [Community College] and Ed Corbett [Ohio State] was also involved in those conversations. And there was a great and it was first—the first meeting of what became CAWS [00:50:00] was at an MLA meeting in New York City. The idea was we wanted to bring all of the program directors together. And the notion of the WPA was a kind of joke which was the WPA that works progress administration and that was part of the pleasure of it. We were not going to take ourselves very seriously.

So when we were sitting around in a bar and whatever the hotel was in New York, we all started thinking about well what we should call it, and we said well let’s call it the WPA, that will be kind of fun and no one would take it overly seriously. But what happened was something very different. It was taken very seriously by CCCC, and it was regarded as a threat to the future of the CCCC. And the most important person in that was Richard Lloyd-Jones, Jix Jones, who had been the Chair for CCCC for a number of years and was the leading figure. And Ed Corbett was in the room at that MLA meeting and he was the Director of the Writing Program at Ohio State University and did this very famous book called the Classical Rhetorical Tradition or Writing in the Classical Rhetorical Traditions, a wonderful book published by Oxford University Press.
And it was Ed who intervened and said look, “These people are all reasonable people and they’re not trying to take over CCCC,” and there was no putsch involved, and we were like “Well, you’ve got to be kidding me!” So then we said, “Okay, we’ve got to find a name that no one is going to take very seriously,” so that’s why we called—one of the reasons we called it the WPA. But it was an idea which was to bring writing program directors from around the country, Jim Slevin—now diseased—from Georgetown was in that room—a wonderfully smart guy, fabulous guy. There were lot of people, maybe 20 people who were at the core of that. But the CUNY people were pretty well [00:52:00] organized, because we had already been doing this with CAWS, and we had a structure, and Harvey [Wiener] really was the leader. He was the person who put an enormous amount of work and intelligence into it. And there was a period—and I’m going to say it was after eight, maybe 10 years that Harvey had been a President—and I said Harvey “You got to resign because, you know, you—this can’t continue where you’re the leader all the time. We need to make some space for other people,” and of course he understood that, and he said “Well, I’m doing all the work and”—but he was wonderful about all of that.

* * * * *

But that’s where – that’s how – it was Bruffee, Harvey, Elaine Maimon, myself, Ed Corbett and I’m probably leaving out lots of really terrific people that I can’t remember at the moment.

* * * * *

What we decided to do was we wanted to create a network nationally of writing program directors where if they had a problem—they were trying to deal with some difficulty—they could call and they could get help. So initially it was very informal in a loose alliance and affiliation of people. Then what happened was that that was fairly successful, and it was just kind of like a—not a swap meet, but it would be “Oh, if you have that kind of problem, you should talk to Ken Bruffee because he is working on small group stuff and he will be very helpful to you” and et cetera, et cetera.

And then—and I think it may have been Jim Slevin . . . David Bartholomae was running—by that time David Bartholomae was running the writing program at Pitt—a fabulous, brilliant, theoretician and teacher of writing (and another Rutgers guy, who took writing really very seriously; he came out of that same tradition). And we formalized it by offering a service which is that if you are a writing [00:54:00] program director, we would come in, take a look at what you were doing, and try to be helpful to you. So it was a kind of—it was a service that we provided to colleagues in different parts of the country. And we would try to team up with other WPAs. Well, I went — I must have done 20 of these. I often traveled with Elaine Maimon; I often traveled with Jim Slevin. Jim and I were at Syracuse I remember. I remember being in the northern reaches of Minnesota with Elaine, and they were all occasions of professional camaraderie, if you will.

Then it became a little bit increasingly formalized as it became more and more helpful—and dare I say more successful. So then leaders of a campus—the provost or the president depending on the circumstances of the college—would say “Well I want the WPA to come and evaluate the
writing program” at such and such. And so there were more formal arrangements, and most of us did it for peanuts, I mean there was a consulting fee. But in the beginning there was nothing like that, but when it got—became more formal, it became a kind of formal service and—but all of this gravitated again around Mina, and Mina gave her famous speech out here at MLA in 1975, the famous “Diving in” speech which changed the game in many, many ways.

Part XII

“The key to education… is enabling people to exercise their individual power with language.”

If you believe in the principles of a literate and participatory democracy, writing is the most powerful form of individual nonviolent empowerment in history. So it was a very serious ethical and moral issue for all of us—and it is for me today, it still is. I have no other reason to continue teaching other than that, right, because the alternative to education is catastrophe, and the key to education in my judgment is enabling people to exercise their individual power with language.

Credits:

Donald McQuade: An Oral History of the Rutgers PhD Program, Open Admissions CUNY, the Shaughnessy Circle, CAWS, and the WPA

Special Thanks to Professor Don McQuade

A Comp Comm Production, 2015.

Produced, Directed & Edited by Sean Molloy


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I was accepted to City College’s Pre-Baccalaureate program in June of 1966. I had applied to the University of Puerto Rico and been accepted. But my high school counselors encouraged me to accept the Pre-Bac offer and so I went to City College. The Pre-Bac program was later called SEEK.

At home I had spoken only Spanish until I began kindergarten—where I was excited to learn my first English word: “look.” My parents taught me to read Spanish at age 3-4. We lived first in East Harlem at 119th and Lexington Avenue. We then moved to Throgs Neck in the Bronx where I went to junior high school. I went to James Monroe High School.

In my public schools, I had been an excellent reader and average student. But all the way through high school, I never really mastered the grammatical part of English—which has many rules and exceptions. The speech patterns I developed over time were formal, grounded in the more complex verb tenses we commonly used in Spanish. But my English teachers in school didn’t understand these complex tenses; they didn’t know these tenses were also correct uses of English. They told me I was “awkward.”

There was also a high school leadership and cultural pride program in my high school called “Aspira.” It helped us to graduate as prepared, potential leaders.

At City College, in the fall of 1966 I took English 1.1 with Anthony Penale. He had a masterful knowledge of English grammar and was able to translate it in a way that made it exciting. He taught it to us with a special mastery and joy. I remember he taught us about 26 different verb tenses. Penale inspired my love for English; he is the model for me of a great teacher—the kind of teacher I wish I could be. He had fervor, energy and vibrancy.

Penale would run across the front of the room challenging and encouraging students. He was manic in his quest to show students when we did well: “You got it! You got it!”

Penale’s energy and support was just what we needed because we were so jaded and fearful about mastering English. Penale broke the mold and broke the fear. The way Penale taught me verb tenses helped me bridge Spanish to English. Penale brought out the richness of the language. He was really one of a kind. He showed me that my speech patterns were formal and correct—not awkward, as my other English teachers had called them. Penale made me feel good about who I was and that I was not awkward.

I can’t remember if Penale used *English 3200* but I think we used a workbook like that and we had grammar quizzes. I can’t remember the course readings or writing assignments now.

I injured my leg in a lacrosse accident during the semester and I had to take a leave of absence; so I didn’t finish Penale’s course and I got a “J” grade.

I did not take the SEEK reading course. I tested out of it.
My counselor during all my time at City was Peter Schlacker. He was excellent; I had my first therapeutic experience/relationship with him. He helped me to unfold a number of issues I had been carrying without realizing it; he helped me to understand myself better. He was the best part of the SEEK program for me.

Martha Weisman was one of my speech teachers. She was fantastic. She let me be demonstrative and speak up at my full natural volume. Toward the end of the class we were doing Shakespeare speech demonstrations. I chose a King Lear speech on the heath. We met in Shepard Hall; it was raining hard with heavy rain; there was a bench under some bow windows. I jumped up on the bench to give my speech. Martha was very happy. I got an A in the course and she offered me as a good example to other students. Shakespeare in other classes was boring; something we had to read; but not in Martha’s class. The SEEK teachers were not afraid to let us speak up and find that center in ourselves.

These experiences built my confidence as the Aspira program had done in high school. Eventually, I ran for student body president.

I don’t remember my other writing teachers, but I see from my transcript that I took English 5.8 in the Spring of 1967, and English 1.8 in the Fall of 1967 and passed both courses. I took English 2.8 in the Spring of 1968 but dropped it; I took it again and passed it in the Fall of 1968.

I vaguely remember Toni Cade, Addison Gayle and Fred Byron, but I can’t remember if they were my teachers or I just met them through the SEEK program.

I was actively involved in politics and the student strike and I took a semester off. But I got very interested in writing and speech classes and I took several more of each starting in the Fall of 1971.

By the time I graduated in 1973, I was already married with a son. I began working within New York City government. In 2005, I entered a New York City program for new teachers and earned my masters degree at Pace in bi-lingual elementary education while teaching school full time. I taught grades one through six, teaching math and language arts until I recently retired. I still work now as a substitute teacher for middle and high school students.
Janet Mayes: An Oral History of the CCNY 1960’s SEEK Program
(June 29, 2016)

I was born in 1942 in Washington Heights in Manhattan, just under the George Washington Bridge. I was a Jewish “red diaper” baby—meaning much of my extended family were Communists—and I grew up with those ideals. My mom was a housewife and my dad was a postal clerk. I was brought up to believe that women didn’t go to college, that “smart” women don’t find husbands; I was discouraged and discouraged (“you’ll use up your eyes if you read too much.”); I think that’s how I ended up resonating with students who had been not validated as people who could think.

I went to P.S. 173 in Manhattan; then we moved to Queens and I went to Hillside Junior High School. I went to the School of Performing Arts in Manhattan and studied music, mainly as a classical timpanist. Then I went to Queens College for a year but felt I had to leave home, so I transferred to City College and found an apartment with a roommate back in Washington Heights. I was a City College student from 1961 to 1964. I lived off student loans and part-time jobs. At City I met Rose Zimbardo. She validated me as smart and took me under her wing; I started as a pre-med major and wanted to be a psychiatrist. But I switched to English, focusing on dramatic literature; I felt it was another way to really understand human interaction.

I went to U.Cal, Berkeley for my masters in English Literature, and became very involved in the anti-Vietnam War protest, The Free Speech Movement (or FSM). We didn’t have masters theses there, but my equivalent seminar project was on “Hamlet and the Meditative Tradition.” I came back to New York in 1966; that summer, I completed the Instant Teacher Training Program and started teaching at I.S. 88. I was woefully unprepared and hardly lasted a semester. Rose suggested I apply to teach in the SEEK program. I interviewed (maybe with Ed Volpe and Tony Penale) and was accepted; I began teaching in SEEK in Spring 1967.

When I started, Tony Penale was the SEEK English Director; in the summer of 1967, he was replaced by Mina Shaughnessy. (I didn’t know he had a heart attack until this interview today.) Mina made me her assistant in a way, and I ultimately took charge of the tutorial program that I established there. In addition to Tony, I remember other SEEK English teachers, including Toni Cade, Addison Gayle, Fred Byron and Barbara Christian. Amy Sticht’s name is familiar, but I don’t remember her.

In later years David Henderson, Alice Trillin, Raymond Patterson, June Jordan, Adrienne Rich and Blanche Skurnick taught with us too. In 1967 or 1968, a special creative writing group came from Columbia University and joined us as writer-teachers, including Audre Lorde. I team-taught classes with Audre; she taught the creative writing side and I taught the grammar side. She often would visit my classroom, because she said she wanted to learn teaching techniques from me, which really blew my mind; I never believed I was special or particularly skilled, and Audre made me feel great about my work. I also remember how many of the women students of color would gather around her in the SEEK administrative office, and hang onto her every word. I’m sure many of them became great poets in their own right. In SEEK we taught three different writing courses; the team-taught course we worked on together was the first-level course in the sequence.
One summer, probably in 1968, I was visiting friends in Iowa with my husband and I observed a University of Iowa writing program that included tutors who were dedicated to assisting students struggling with writing. I thought this was a great model for us to use in the City College SEEK Program, and wrote a detailed proposal for how to structure the first-level basic writing course. I proposed longer classroom hours, more times a week, with peer support and student tutors whom we would screen, recruited from the pool of English majors. In these new first level writing classes, the students would have no homework—all work would be done during these longer classroom hours—because so many of our students experienced strenuous difficulties getting their work done at home. After the lesson of the day, the students would all do their exercises, writing and editing in this very supportive on-campus atmosphere, with tutors and their teacher circulating to help.

I developed my proposed model of learning-through-validation, by drawing from Harry Stack Sullivan’s Interpersonal Theory about how people learn. Ultimately, my doctoral dissertation in Clinical Psychology (Yeshiva University, 1978) was on “Social Facilitation of Learning.”

I remember presenting my proposal to a group of English faculty. I explained that students needed validation; it was more effective than learning in isolation, and especially more effective if the atmosphere did not include whatever was going on in many of their households. My idea was non-traditional and it made the faculty nervous. (I could tell because almost everyone simultaneously lit up cigarettes!) Nevertheless, Mina traveled to Iowa to study their program, and then, after obtaining our English Department’s approval, asked me to implement my proposal.

I ran two or three of these prototype classes. At the end of the semester, the students took a writing evaluation test of some kind and they performed better on that test than other students who had completed our second-level SEEK composition course.

Out of that model, we also developed the walk-in Writing Center. I remember Alice Chandler; I don’t remember when she became involved, but I think this kind of supportive learning was in the air during those years, and together and separately we built upon these early experiences.

When Mina left, several people asked me about applying to take her place, but I felt there was no way I could fill her shoes.

In my teaching, I always believed that we must start where the student is and respect what they bring into the classroom. Nevertheless, when I first came to SEEK, I was a rigid grammarian; I thought all students should learn the “king’s English.” At first, in SEEK my teaching was grounded in my own freshman comp class at City in 1961; I taught direct grammar lessons. I taught using a literature model. I had students write about what they were reading. I also taught forms of model essays, a method that I had learned when I took freshman composition at City College. Professor Frederick Shipley was my freshman comp teacher there. (I volunteered to take it as a sophomore; I placed out of comp at Queens College, but I thought my writing should be better).
But soon I realized that students had to draft first and then use grammar rules to edit their writing. Get their ideas there, spill them out—and then “English it up” later. I continued to teach grammar, like subject/verb agreement and how to recognize and “fix” run-on sentences. But I told the students to write first, and then to use those rules later when they were editing. I never used the English 3200 grammar handbook or another grammar textbook. I developed a different kind of applied grammar exercises for my book (Writing and Rewriting, Prentice Hall, 1972 & 1981) and for tutoring centers. I also developed worksheets for starting and generating essays.

I picked my own books and I primarily chose individual books rather than anthologies. I had become interested in Black writers at Berkeley; I began to offer great Black writers to students when I taught in I.S. 88; I included them in my City College SEEK courses starting in Spring 1967. I taught Lysistrata and Thoreau, but I also taught Langston Hughes and Richard Wright.

One of my required readings was Thoreau’s “Essay on Civil Disobedience”. My students had my home phone number. One evening, a student in ROTC called me quite confused and upset, wanting to discuss the Thoreau essay, and we had an hour-long conversation; at the end he exclaimed that he had to shed his uniform. He later became a leader in the 1969 student protests. Another student, at my request, tirelessly sat with me in the cafeteria and tried to teach me Spanish; he watched, I think with recognition of his own struggles, as I struggled to learn it. One student gave me an anti-Vietnam War sculpture he made.

Tony Penale’s philosophy was to make the SEEK students into scholars. He taught the classics. He was very emotive; he said we should mold the students “like clay.” I disagreed; I thought we had to learn from them. But he was also extremely kind and supportive. I was so nervous when he came to observe my class that I made a mistake—it was a grammar lesson and I spent half the class teaching it all wrong; then I realized it and said “Wait!” and started over. I was deeply embarrassed; but Tony was very sweet about it; he said “Good for you!” In later years, I became so confident of my methods, especially when I did the tutoring-based courses, that I didn’t care who came in to observe. I was proud.

Mina was better than Tony at embracing the brilliance of what the students and teachers brought to the program. She listened rather than told; she picked people’s brains: “Janet, tell me your opinion about this; tell me your opinion about that.” She incorporated my ideas about tutoring based classes and the Writing Center into the program. In short I grew exponentially from Mina, the faculty and especially from my students.

We had SEEK teacher meetings. I don’t remember the content but I remember being in awe of Barbara Christian and Toni Cade. They talked about their teaching and students, but I can’t remember the details. They were both energetic, political, outspoken—especially Toni—models of what I wanted to be. They were amazing dedicated teachers. And Toni was always right on the money in catching and calling out racism in this white middleclass enclave in the middle of Harlem. I emulated Toni Cade; I’m not sure how she felt about me—she never knew how much I admired and emulated her. I was shy; I stammered, except when I was teaching. All I remember about Addison Gayle is that he was a sophisticated and gracious professorial type who always had a pipe in his hand.
We didn’t have any high-stakes grammar final exams in our SEEK classes. I don’t remember if we gave any formal final exams. I didn’t give any grammar tests; instead, I showed students how to apply the rules that they learned when they rewrote their drafts. (I didn’t give out grades on the early drafts.) So, one student would have trouble with subject/verb agreement, run on sentences. I’d ask that student to focus on one thing only in a rewrite and show her how to do it; then she’d edit the draft to “fix” that kind of issue. My mood was: don’t let your wonderful ideas get tossed away by the traditional collegiate readers because of grammatical and organizational issues. Get your ideas out, and then make them “acceptable” to your readers, especially if they are going to give you a grade for your work.

I also asked students to do larger kinds of writing. One way was to have students talk out a rough draft. I’d say, “just explain it as you would to a very smart ten-year-old. Say it and expect them to ask questions and put in the answers to those questions.” Students might tape record their words and then transcribe them. Or they’d work in pairs: one partner would talk into a tape recorder while the other asked questions. Then the writer would transcribe the spoken draft and revise. Students were often stuck because they worried about writing everything down perfectly the first time. They learned to just spill out their ideas. Then, I’d say, “OK, now let’s put it into a form where you add a lead-in to the first paragraph and some kind of topic sentence for the essay, and then, in subsequent paragraphs add specifics to prove your point, or elaborate on your idea.” That would produce a second draft (still not worrying about grammar and spelling). The third draft included editing and proofreading. This method evolved as I taught in the program.

I assigned in-class themes—which traditionally were supposed to be completed alone without much rewrite; but I organized the students to work with peer support, with students helping each other by asking questions when they got stuck and then rewriting and editing their own drafts.

I didn’t study composition theorists, publish articles or go to many conferences. I learned as I taught; I experimented; and I developed my ideas over time.

I remember Les Berger and Allen Ballard because they were administrators and chaired meetings; I didn’t know them personally. I thought the English Department Chair, Ed Volpe, was supportive; I don’t remember much about him. I had studied with Edgar Johnson, the Dickens scholar who was Chair when I was a student.

I was close to Bertha Doleman, a SEEK reading teacher. Fran Giteles, a counselor, and I were very close. We kept up over the years when we ran into each other at demonstrations and rallies.

SEEK desegregated City College. There was a negative reaction among many professors who were worried about the college’s status and standards going down. That was their big issue, and we, students and faculty, struggled against their conservatism in 1969. My student Henry Arce was one of the leaders during the struggle for Open Enrollment. I supported the protests in a faculty group along with Adrienne Rich, Fran Giteles, and so many others from the SEEK Program, and with other progressive faculty members from the “regular” college.
The faculty, administrators and students argued over the student demands. Some of us “sat-in” (I think at Shepard Hall) with the students during the struggle. Some of us on the faculty tried to mediate, but we shouldn’t have. There was a big raucous meeting in 1969 in the Great Hall during the struggle for Open Enrollment. Kenneth Clark had everyone stand up, hold hands and have a moment of silence.

One summer, when I was in London, gathering excerpts from African authors to include my basic writing text, Betty Rawls, from the SEEK Counseling Department, disappeared during a visit to the South with her boyfriend. Their small private plane had failed to show up at their next airport, but the Southern authorities stopped looking for them, so SEEK students went down, fanned out and found the wreckage in a farmer’s field. There were reports that racists, angry that Black people would be flying a private plane, had siphoned their gas tank.

I stayed at City College past the protests in 1969. I’m not sure exactly when I left. In about 1970, I entered a Ph.D. program in clinical psychology at Yeshiva University. But I kept working various jobs as a basic writing teacher, organizing tutoring programs, setting up learning centers, and as a consultant to administrators of programs or potential programs designed to accomplish goals similar to SEEK.

Kenneth Bruffee hired me to start a learning center, a tutoring center, in a quonset hut at Brooklyn College campus. (Mina recommended me to Ken.) He was an appreciative live-wire; he’d pop in and out; he was just a wonderful guy; we had mutual profound respect for one another. We talked for hours about the need for tutoring and peer support.

I became kind of known for doing that kind of work; so various colleges engaged me to come in and start the “Study Group” programs that I had developed, intervention programs for students on academic probation. I taught these students how to study using “parallel” and “cooperative” learning techniques. The premise, as before, was that people learn better when they are helping each other, supported by other people. Students who were getting Ds and Fs began getting As and Bs.

I consulted with Jim Nash and the faculty at Montclair State. (I think Ken referred me to him.) I taught at William Paterson University; I worked for a year establishing and heading up a program at Baruch. After I got my Ph.D. in Psychology in 1978, I was appointed Chair of the Basic Skills/Counseling Department at Bucks County Community College. I established and directed a similar program at Ramapo College. I continued teaching basic writing part-time and consulting until the 1990s at, among others, Hostos, Rutgers-Newark, Wayne, College of New Rochelle, Pace … For a few years, I was a full-time counselor at York College, where I also established and ran Study Groups for students on academic probation.

In my Writing and Rewriting text that I published in 1971 or 72 and rewrote about ten years later, I created applied grammar exercises that used passages from expert writers. I went to London to cull examples for my book from African literature, to add to the collection of African American, Caribbean, and Latin authors I used as examples and for the substance of exercises. In the exercises, I created intentional errors (according to the lesson covered in a particular chapter) in uncredited passages from, for example, Baldwin’s Native Son. Students would read the
passage to find and edit the intentional errors; then they would look up the “answers” in the back of the book and read the original passage in context, with the author’s name and citation. So, learning how to catch grammatical and syntactical errors would be fun and instructive, because students were also reading great works of literature and guessing who the authors were.

I remember discussions about the City College Writing proficiency test. I wasn’t happy that they were developing that kind of thing. Maybe some of my students took it, but I left soon after it was implemented.

I don’t like what Mina ultimately did as a Dean at CUNY. She developed and implemented standardized tests as gateways. I don’t think you can judge people based on whether they can pass a standardized test in order to be allowed to go on and get a higher degree. It’s a British model, and it’s classist and racist. Not everybody tests well. And I’m sorry that she evolved into that, from where she came from with her wonderful heart. We talked by phone off and on over the years. I called her when I heard she was gravely ill, but we never talked about the testing systems and how she came to support and develop them.

I am now a full-time psychologist in private practice, and continue to work with people whose low self-esteem and other obstacles get in the way of their reaching their full potential and having satisfying, productive lives. I am completing a book on Interpersonal Theory with three other practitioners; we are about to send out proposals to publishers. I also published a science fiction novel under my penname, Janet Rose, *Beyond the Horse’s Eye; a Fantasy Out of Time* (2013). I remain very active politically, in affiliation with The International Action Center, founded by Ramsey Clark. As a lesbian, I am also very active in the LGBTQ community and in the International Working Women’s Coalition.

I have to say, that although I was brought up with progressive ideals, and began to find my voice at Berkeley in the Free Speech Movement, it was really my experience with my colleagues and students in the SEEK program that grew me beyond my wildest expectations. I am so grateful.
I was born in Harlem in 1950 and raised in Brooklyn, New York. I grew up and went to school in Bedford-Stuyvesant until the end of the eighth grade at which point I attended Brooklyn Technical High School.

My father, who had earned a diploma at Brooklyn College, told me to go to the City University. He didn’t dictate which unit—but did say that there was no way I was going to sink the family financially trying to pay for Brown or some other ivy league school when the City University was perfectly good. And it turned out this was probably the second best decision my father ever made for me—the first was having me enroll at Brooklyn Tech, versus go to prep school. At Tech I participated in the college prep program with a focus on mathematics and science.

I joined the Black Panther Party in May of my senior year at Tech. Actually I joined the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in late 1967, and by May of 1968 SNCC merged with the Black Panther Party. As a teenager, I was very much attracted to the more militant side of the civil rights movement after the deaths of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy, and the recalcitrant attitudes of the general public concerning the values the country was supposed to stand for. I was an avid student of political theory, and was prepared to personally work for positive change in the country. My involvement with the Party lasted about a year, ending in July of 1969. During my time in the Black Panther Party I made the acquaintance of, and had a working relationship with, Bobby Seale, David Hilliard, and Eldridge & Kathleen Cleaver. I left the Party a couple of months before I returned to City College for the Fall term of 1969.

I enrolled at City College in September of 1968, but I had to take a leave of absence in the Spring of 1969 because I went on vacation with the authorities. I spent my Spring semester divided between the Federal Detention Headquarters at West Street, and in the main Rikers Island, later on that Spring. My trip to the Federal Detention Headquarters was a result of my attempting to travel to a Panther funeral in California for John Huggins and Bunchy Carter while carrying a pistol. At the time, I and my traveling companion Party member Tyrone Smith, believed that we needed to be able to protect ourselves in California where the Party was in conflict with Ron Karenga’s group “US.” We later learned that COINTELPRO instigated the friction between the Party and the group “US.”

My time on Riker’s Island was a result of having been indicted for attempted murder of two police officers, in spite of Brooklyn DA Eugene Gold’s knowledge that there was no evidence against me that was admissible in court. The “evidence” that he had was a false allegation from one of the actual perpetrators of the crime that I had been involved. Gold knew that I was innocent of all charges, but decided to prosecute anyway. For years I was furious with Gold, but in later years he got his. He was caught down South with his hand down the knickers of a ten year old girl. I remembered what I learned in Sunday School: The Lord said “Vengeance is mine, I will repay.”
You know, I had been to Cuba for the Party…France, Prague. For the first year that the Party operated in New York I served as the Defense Captain of the New York chapter, and then became the Deputy Minister of Defense for the state. It was a big commitment and in my first semester at City College, Fall of 1968, I had something like a 1.8 grade point average. It was a disaster, but I was being a revolutionary. And I’ll just let it go at that. When I came back to school in the Fall of 1969 I earned a 4.0 GPA.

City College has consistently had just a world-class faculty. Of the public colleges in the country, City College, I believe, is still number one in Nobel Prizes (10). They had an outstanding faculty — and I mean in all subjects. I majored in English and minored in French and Political Science. There were brilliant teachers there: Janet Gattey (a caucasian born in Dahomey, now Benin, Africa) was chair of the French department at the time, and was still around at the last alumni meeting that I attended while I was still living in the New York area. I also took Latin at City College—just great, great teachers.

In the field of athletics I had the great honor of becoming a member of the CCNY Varsity Fencing Team, headed by the renowned coach Edward F. Lucia, Sr.

Upon entering City College I knew nothing of the SEEK Program, though I started meeting some SEEK students when I came back to the campus from my “vacation” in 1969. Most of my friends were admitted on academics and did not get SEEK stipend checks. The SEEK students were very fine people; but that wasn’t my world.

I had taken Advance Placement English at Brooklyn Tech, which should have excused me from taking English 1. But no one at City ever advised me about my course schedules. When I went to register there were 2,000 people going through Shepard’s Great Hall, monkeying around with these little registration cards. There was no online registration back then. And for many students meeting with an advisor just didn’t happen.

It would have been nice if someone told me that I didn’t need the prerequisite to take other English courses. And so I thought I needed to have college-level writing skills and took two semesters of Pass/Fail English, which were unnecessary and frankly not very fruitful. For me they were useless.

The first semester I had Alan Rinzler who was an adjunct professor, and who was actually an editor at the publishing house of Holt-Rinehart-Winston. Alan Rinzler was an interesting person. He was in his hash-smoking period at the time. And the most I remember from that class was that Toni Morrison came and spoke to us, and there were two girls in the class that a friend of mine and I tried to date.

The second semester was taught by Richard Brickner, who was a writer. Mr. Brickner’s course made me furious because I thought his English bordered on incompetency. So that was the end of that.
My English studies went on, however. My mentor was Bill Herman, and I studied Milton with Professor Mintz. I studied some with Richard Goldstone and Leo Hamalian, and these were all first-class guys. I studied Middle English with Saul Brody—a very, very good teacher.

I was very close to Bill Herman who later helped me to get into the graduate program at Yale University. He and Saul Brody were the two gentlemen that I remember most. I do remember how much I enjoyed Professor Mintz’s Milton class. But my English experience at City College was fairly close to apolitical. I did not seek, and didn’t really receive, political direction or inspiration from my instructors—but that was probably more me. I was one of those guys that came in before open admissions; I got there on my academics. And I came to college to go to college.

In my opinion—and I know a lot of people disagree with me on this—you don’t go to college to have a memorable experience in being part of something transcendental and earth-shattering the way some characterize the Spring of ’69. You’re not there to have a good time or have your consciousness raised. You’re there to be trained for what you will do in the future. You need to learn how the real world operates, what will be expected of you, and where you should focus your intellectual efforts.

In my opinion, one is never going to be able to compete on a graduate level unless they have studied certain disciplines. When I got to Yale—I went to Yale for a couple of years after City College—the first day I sat in class I knew I was unprepared. I had had no background in philosophy. I had had a marginal background in history. I had studied mostly political science—having been of that mindset when I entered City. I was very well prepared linguistically because I had minored in French, and I took about twelve credits of Latin, but I had no German and that was a mistake. This, I felt, should have been addressed by City College advisors or somebody.

I worked harder at Yale than I ever did in my life. When I was studying Anglo-Saxon (i.e. Old English) I used to work on that stuff until three o’clock in the morning. There were no shortcuts, one just had to get in there and do the work. And that kind of academic discipline, I found, was always an aspect of the engineering and science programs at City College. But in the school of Liberal Arts some of the academicians were convinced that it was more important to make a political statement that made the students feel good, rather than stressing the discipline and preparation necessary to allow the students to compete on the graduate level, or for the professional world that they were about to enter.

Coming off being an officer in the Black Panther Party, I was not overly impressed by the 1969 protests at City. (As I’ve said, I wasn’t on campus that Spring.) Guys were talking about taking the administration building as though it was the Normandy landing. This, to me, was a bit much; though I didn’t want to hurt anybody’s feelings, so I pretty much kept my own counsel on this.

I didn’t agree with what happened with the adoption of the open admissions program, though I understood the perspective of its proponents and what they were trying to do. But I remember, after open admissions was a reality, one hopelessly lost guy in the Middle English class. He wasn’t prepared for college; he would’ve been struggling as a freshman in high school. But without the requisite remediation for students being swept into senior colleges, there was no
hope that most of them would thrive. Unless these students had extraordinary support from home, and were exceptional people in their own right, they could not look to the college to bring them up to speed because they were too far behind.

I have no recollection of how I got involved with *The Paper*. I knew Paul Simms as the head guy when I got connected with *The Paper*, when it was still called *Tech News*. And there were other people around like Jane Tillman Irving, who graduated in 1969. Francee Covington was also around. Two other people I would mention are both white: one is David Friedlander, who did some brilliant work on the Attica prison riot in 1971 in either *Tech News* or *The Paper*, and Tom McDonald, who frankly should have been editor-in-chief in the early 70’s but who was the wrong color. Luis Rivera was editor very early on—but after Paul Simms. Luis became the driving force after Paul left the school.

So, the people I associated with, the guys I hung out with in *The Paper* office, were David Friedlander, Tom McDonald, and Albert De Leon, all very close friends of mine at the time. Friedlander was an incredible intellectual. I mean I just can’t begin to go into the depth of this man’s intellect. And Tom McDonald, if I ever had to be in a union movement or something like that, I would want Tom there because Tom was incredibly smart and his heart was completely in the corner of the disenfranchised. He worked like a dog for that paper, which is why I was so upset when he couldn’t move up. But my people had to have what my people had to have, though we are all often misguided in our assessments and actions. And Albert De Leon, a lifelong friend and brother, carried all of the weight when we were co-editors of *The Paper*, but I was too busy working, studying, and commuting back and forth to campus from Brooklyn to be of any effective assistance.

Others who were there and greatly admired were Jerry Mondesire, Bob Collazo, Sekou Sundiata (ne Bob Feaster), Charles Powell, Ray Frost, Jeff Morgan, H. Rex Linsley, John Bohn, and Maxine Alexander. Dorothy Randall, Desira Benjamin, Brunilda Pabon, and David Caldwell were also integral members of the staff that I remember working with.

At the 2007 reunion I saw a copy of *The Paper* which advertised itself as the African-American voice at City College. But *The Paper* staff in my time included Luis and a fair number of other Latino and Latina voices. One Latina student who was there after my time, Faviola Soto, later became a New York judge. We addressed the black issues of the day, but we also addressed the Latino community, as well as other communities of color. And we were an inter-faith office where everyone’s religious beliefs were treated with respect. We had trouble while we were *Tech News* because we had a Palestinian kid from campus who would write an article from time to time, and some guys from the Jewish Defense League came over to the office and basically told us we were going to die if we kept publishing this “Palestinian crap.” And I guess they didn’t know that I was an ex-Panther and I didn’t really care. But after they paid us a visit, the next issue we published Mohammed again. These were real issues in real times and not just collegiate fritter. We were living in a time of great social turmoil as well as political upheaval. There were great changes going on in this country including the Attorney General of the United States, and agents of the CIA, committing felonies, ultimately leading to the resignation of the President—I mean it just wasn’t a normal period of time.
After college and graduate school, I worked in banking and finance for twenty-one years. I probably used more of my Brooklyn Tech education than my City College English education. Although I will say that my preparation in English got me very, very far because I was among the more literate of my colleagues in terms of being able to write clearly and concisely, and being able to speak in an intelligent and intelligible manner.

I’ll tell you a funny and interesting story. I once arranged an out of town prospecting call with a gentleman whom I had never before met. We had talked over the phone but when I showed up at his office I could tell by the look in his eyes that he had no previous idea that I was black. And I could see it took him about fifteen minutes to get over it. But that’s because at that point in time, before I became a geezer, my elocution was such that it just sounded like standard Mid-Western unaccented English, and not in any way an ethnic patois.

When I got into banking and started to meet kids from other schools—UVA and Penn, University of Chicago—I got a perspective from them on another type of college life. We were not a land grant institution at City College. We were a public college and we were a commuter school back then (we didn’t have any dorms). Kids elsewhere were busy getting drunk and pushing pianos out of windows, and that was the joy of their college years. I never had that experience. The students with whom I associated, like the people on The Paper, weren’t that frivolous; they didn’t go to school to have fun. We went to school to change our lives and to improve ourselves. I mean even the people that I may not have agreed with politically were serious people with deep ideas, and in search of further depth.

Later I also worked as a high school teacher for a number of years before I had a stroke and had to retire. I taught in juvenile detention in Newark, New Jersey. I am one of the most virulent voices with respect to the quality of English literacy and education. I think the Oxford English Dictionary is a source that should be consulted, and not just used as a doorstop. As a teacher, I demanded actual skills that could be used on the planet, not in somebody’s imagination and that got me in trouble sometimes. The school was an alternative school, which meant that the administrators could relax the standards a bit to deal with kids who maybe hadn’t been to school for five years before they got in trouble for murder, carjacking, or drugs, and you tried to work with them to bring them along. I didn’t care whether these kids felt good about themselves. I wanted them to become competent professionals, and to be able to blow people away with their skills when they got into the workplace, rather than “going postal” out of frustration.

Today, I am an anachronism. People are into the cult of me and whatever, and wonder why they are unemployable and underpaid (according to them). I once got in trouble with my principal for pointing out an error in a verb inflection in a Maya Angelou poem. Once again I learned that “feel good” is more important than competence. That’s why the prep school kids will continue to run the world, and people who steal their degrees rather than earn them can kiss their collective asses goodbye. I’m with Thomas Sowell: in the next 50 years, there may be events that trigger a right-wing takeover in the United States. If that happens, we, in our indolent lethargy and lack of focus, will only have ourselves to blame.

Peace out.
I want to make one thing clear at the outset: I was not a SEEK student at City College. As a graduate of Hunter College High School, a prestigious institution for gifted girls, and the product of a middle class home, I was neither academically nor culturally disadvantaged and had no need for the “elevation” the program’s name so patronizingly promises.

I emphasize this because there is a presumption among many people, including some who should know better, that all black students who attended the college during that time were SEEK students.

For my entire four years at City (September 1965—June 1969, before the advent of Open Admissions) I was a full time day session student, usually the only black person in my class, except for mammoth lecture sessions or gym classes (the demographics at CCNY were very different in those days; the stigma that tainted the entire City University for decades after Open Admissions had not occurred when I was there).

I am participating in this project because I was on the staff of the newspaper “Tech News” (originally for and by engineering and architecture students) which morphed into the black student newspaper called “The Paper” after I graduated, and because of my activities in the black student movements at City College at the time.

My grandfather was a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church - the denomination founded by free blacks in New York City in 1796, which now has about one million members worldwide. I am a fifth generation AME Zion member. My family members have belonged to the denomination in North Carolina and other states for five generations. My grandfather (mother's father) pastored churches from Birmingham, Alabama, to Hartford, Connecticut, with stops in Washington, D.C. and Philadelphia and many places in North Carolina. My mother's parents were born in North Carolina in the 1880's. He was a school principal and she a teacher before they married and he became a minister.

I am a third generation college graduate. Both my parents went to Howard; my father attended there both for his undergraduate and medical degrees. Many of my relatives are also Livingstone College (Salisbury, North Carolina) graduates, including my mother's youngest brother, Harrel Gordon Tillman, who died in 1998 and who was the first black judge in the state of Texas. There, Black studies were integrated into the curriculum. I never got that kind of instruction at any level in school.

When I was four, my mother took me to see Dr. Kenneth Clark, a black professor at CCNY - he had done the experiments with dolls that were used in the landmark Supreme Court case Brown v Board by Thurgood Marshall of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund. At his institution, called the Northside Testing Center (later called the Northside Center for Child Development), Dr. Clark’s staff me an IQ test and told my parents that I was gifted. Of course, they already knew that.
I grew up around the corner from CCNY on 141st St., between Convent and Amsterdam Ave. not far from the Hamilton Grange, which was then a museum open to the public. My parents had divorced; I lived in a brownstone with my mother and my aunt, her sister. I rode my tricycle around the gates of CCNY, in front of the statue of Alexander Webb, had my picture taken near the flagpole at about 15 months old wearing a white lawn dress with white French knots and embroidery and brown oxfords (still have the picture and the dress, of course). As a toddler I learned the words "gargoyle" (I asked what those faces and animals on Shepard Hall-then called the Main Building-were) and "foundation" (I'm told I pronounced it "downation," because they were tearing down the old library at 141 St. and Convent Ave. in order to build what came to be Steinman Hall, the Engineering and Architecture building). We sat on the walls. We went to concerts at Lewisohn Stadium.

I went to nursery school at Riverside Church; Riverside School drew from the surrounding area and from Columbia University. Then I went to my neighborhood school, P.S. 192. My neighborhood around P.S. 192 (in Hamilton Heights) was very integrated. There were Italians, Jews, Russian Christians, Greeks, Armenians, Asians, blacks, Hispanics. Then I left that school district for P.S. 129's gifted program for two years, grades five and six; P.S. 129 may have been the only school I've ever attended with a majority black population. The gifted classes had many white children as well, and, in the classes after mine, several Asian students.

I went to Hunter College High School from September 1959 through June 1965 (grades 7 through 12) - a school for gifted girls. (The class of 1965 had 187 girls: five of us were black, three were Asian, one was Hispanic.) THE school is now co-ed. Applicants had to have a certain IQ to take the admission test. My high school was racist but we got a great education. No one had to do any work her first year in college because we all understood "how to play the academic game."

I had a strong intellectual and cultural home life. My parents exposed me to a lot of Black history and black writers; my father was a doctor, my mother a stay at home mom until I was ten. My parents sent me to Ecuador for the summer to study when I was 15 and to Spain the following year. I was the only black student in the Ecuador group, one of two in Spain. I took ballet from 5 to 25, took modern dance, took guitar lessons, joined the library as soon as I could write my name, was a Brownie and a Girl Scout and a member of the Junior Audubon Society. I grew up in many museums with my mother; she and I had a subscription to a children's theatre series at the 92 Street Y. The first Broadway play I remember seeing was at age 5: "The King and I" with Yul Brynner. Often we went to the ballet. For two years, a friend and I went to the New York Philharmonic's Young People's Concerts at Carnegie Hall, led by Leonard Bernstein. We had seats DD 104 and 105 in the Dress Circle. We took the Fifth Ave. bus by ourselves; she was in fourth grade when we started and I was in fifth; we were two little girls in party dresses with white gloves and patent leather shoes). It was a very “New York” childhood.

All my friends were pretty much like me: middle class children whose parents provided many experiences and enrichments as a matter of course. Most of my black friends were single female children born to older, professional parents. That we would all go to college was a given. (I was 12 before I found out that all people—at least everyone in my world—did not attend college; I thought it was the natural progression after high school).
I went to City College from September 1965 through 1969. As did all students, I took a battery of tests before classes started and tested out of freshman comp. I went in under the old 1907 - or some such -curriculum. I took 10 credits of Latin (of the required 16) before the curriculum was amended. I read Cicero, and was sorry to have missed Ovid, Horace and Catullus. (A person who loved Edith Hamilton's "Mythology" from fourth grade on would have these regrets.)

My first day at CCNY, I couldn't get into a Spanish class I wanted, because all the electives were closed, and I needed the first elective, "Don Quijote." I'd taken AP Spanish and entered college with about 7 credits. I went to Dean Samuel Middlebrook's office and burst into tears, telling him I needed the class because I was going to be a Spanish major (which I believed at the time). He said he didn't think he could put me in the class. I said, "Why not? You're a Dean, aren't you?" I got into the class and got an A.

I was on the staff of The Tech News for about two years. We had a system of issue editors. Tech News morphed into the Paper, a Black student organ, sometime after I graduated in June of 1969.

Paul Simms started on Tech News in 1967, our Sophomore year. We met during freshman year. He started college at the same time as I did, in Fall 1965. Tech News, the engineering and architecture paper, was languishing, so I think Paul saw an opening and joined the staff (he was a science major, pre-med, and had friends among the North Campus people, who would now be called STEM students). Several black students later gravitated there. In those early years, it was mostly Paul and I. Boro Printing on W. 18 St. printed Tech News on linotypes. Paul believed that a lot of typos were inserted into his copy because the typesetters hated his articles, such as an interview with Malcolm X and other “Black Power”—themed pieces.

In addition, I was active on the college radio station, WCCR. We thought of ourselves as just as good as WABC-AM, the top 40 powerhouse that ruled the airwaves (even though we only played in various campus lounges, etc.). Among other things, I did a show of Broadway music—still my favorite—but at the time, I did not consider a career in news. (However, I had been on newspapers and literary magazines in school, SCOUTS, etc., since 4th grade. In fifth grade and sixth grades, my friends and I wrote novels recreationally and reviewed each other's work; we also recreationally produced a fashion magazine for which I wrote the copy.)

I was always a person who wrote and spoke. That's why I became an English major.

My favorite English teachers included Irving Rosenthal for journalism and Arthur Zeiger—with whom I took about 12 credits, including the Honors sequence, in which I was the only black student. I was honored to speak at memorial services for both Zeiger and Rosenthal. Samuel Mintz was a Milton scholar; I took the second required literature survey course with him and also an elective in 17th poetry. Another favorite was James A. Emanuel, the poet. I took his black literature course. It exposed me to things I hadn't experienced in an academic environment. Jessie Fauset became a favorite author and the Harlem Renaissance became "my period." The fiction writer Toni Cade Bambara was my thesis adviser. I wrote my Honors thesis on "The Harlem Novel, 1925-29."
I do not "code switch" when speaking and never have. I cannot tolerate bad grammar, having been raised in a family where both were unknown. One of the worst things blacks in this society do is to permit, and even encourage, THE USE OF non-standard English among their children, so that they have to have to unlearn many bad habits when they get to school.

College exposed me to many different things. There were very few black students at CCNY, especially in day session. Blacks were more likely to attend at night because many worked. I was usually the only black student in my classes. Remember, this was before Open Admissions.

Senior year I pledged Alpha Kappa Alpha, the oldest African-American sorority (founded at Howard University in 1908). I trained freshman advisors. I was also a founding member of the English Majors Caucus. We were a self-selected group of favorite students in the department who met with the faculty to discuss curriculum, have little socials, etc. I was very active; my yearbook entry was the second longest in the book that year.

At City, I never felt that I was being radicalized or politicized. My political horizons were broadened, but my family had long been engaged in political activity. I had that sense of history.

I was active in the Onyx Society (not a founder), which I became aware of in my freshman year. Stan Colleymore was the founder/first president. I participated in the student takeover at the end of my senior year by taking food and supplies to those who were staying in the buildings.

I was not in the February Five Demands meeting where they were presented to President Buell Gordon Gallagher. I was involved in campus shutdown, taking food to the protesters. One of the things that was significant to me was the fire in the Finley Student Center. The day of the fire, I asked to get in but a guard said no. Ed Bradley was covering the takeover for WCBS Radio. He introduced himself, and was responsible for my getting a job right after graduation by telling me about Community News Service, a news service that trained (and paid) young reporters who covered minority neighborhoods. Its product was sent to all newsrooms in the area. The project grew out of the Kerner Commission report, which found that there were few nonwhites employed in the media. Ed and I were not friends, but he was available at various times for when I needed advice.

Francee Covington, a SEEK student, was a leader in the protests. Some English teachers supported the 1969 protests. Toni Cade Bambara was openly supportive of the five demands. She was part of that April 1969 meeting. Different teachers supported the activism in different ways, including Allan Danzig and Arthur Zeiger and Arthur Waldhorn. Zeiger and Waldhorn wrote "English Made Simple." Zeiger wrote "O Brave New World," an anthology, with his great friend Leslie A. Fiedler (author of "Love and Death in the American Novel"). Others were liberal too.

I was interviewed by the New York Times on May 09, 1969, "C.C.N.Y. Student Leaders Divided On Issues Raised by Minority Groups" By Michael Stern. I was much more interested in the Black struggle than the anti-war struggle or the women's rights struggle—because racism was so overarching—it affected the lives of everyone I knew— that it transcended everything
does, of course}. Shirley Chisholm used to say that she had suffered more discrimination as a woman than as a black person; I always wondered what country she was talking about, surely not the United States of America!

A few professors were right wingers, especially Geoffrey Wagner. Wagner was the most conservative-different from the other faculty.

Another right wing teacher was Louis Heller. He was in the Classics department and linguistics. Great teacher. He supported the conservative Staten Island Republican State Senator John Marchi for mayor when John V. Lindsay ran for (and won) a second term (1969). I worked for Lindsay's first campaign when I was 17.

A.K. Burt was an apolitical Shakespeare scholar, Oxford graduate. I think he gave the same lectures, word for word, every semester, but he was quite good. (Gave me two As.)

CCNY alum Fred N. Heckinger was the Education Editor of the NYT. He was enraged by Open Admissions.

The English Department held teach-ins after the King and Robert Kennedy assassinations.

The English courses were quite traditional. Maybe they started to add a little more black literature (Baldwin’s "Go Tell It On the Mountain," some Langston Hughes) to the modern novel course, which included "The Naked and the Dead," Saul Bellow, Joseph Heller, etc. There were very few African-American writers in the curriculum and the canon.

My greatest exposure to black writers was in James Emanuel's black literature class. We read Phillis Wheatley, a Colonial slave poet in Boston whose verse was praised by George Washington, William Wells Brown's "Clotel, or The President's Daughter," a fictionalized version of Jefferson and Sally Hemmings, the first novel by an African American published in the U.S. (1853). Brown was an escaped slave. My mother and grandfather had told me the story. That course exposed me to new authors. Jean Toomer: "Cane," poems like "Brown River, Smile," and the novelist Jessie Fauset.

We read Ellison's "Invisible Man" in Emanuel's course or Zeiger's modern novel; of course, it was on our shelves at home.

Black people were taught many things in black schools and colleges during segregation and at home that were not included in the curricula when schools integrated.

I was exposed to academic publications like the Journal of Blacks in Higher Education and "Phylon," a literary journal. I had already been exposed to journals such as the NAACP's magazine, "The Crisis," at home. The Black Literature course exposed me to an academic perspective on things I had already learned at home.

I got into the CCNY English honors program without taking the required composition classes. I went to someone - I think it was Danzig, rather than (the English Department Chairman)
Edmund Volpe and he excused me from English 2 (Composition 2 in effect). I had taken the English AP test and done well. And then I had taken a CCNY essay placement test. In the CCNY test, I wrote about my "wax wings melting in the sun," thinking, "they're going to love that."

In the spring of 1969, I was writing my Honors thesis. I knew only four Black English majors during my four years at CCNY, including me. Anne Dingle, Verna Hare and Lionel McDonald. I think Lionel went on to get his PhD and teach.

Things had been polarized for some time because most Black students had felt isolated. I still had many white friends, some of whom remain friends, as do people (of various backgrounds) from Hunter College High School, both elementary schools and nursery school. Onyx formed in fall 65, or that's when I became aware of it.

After I graduated, I was in the Alumni Association, and later, the Communications Alumni. After graduating and before starting at Community News Service, I took a graduate level summer course in publishing at Harvard, the Radcliffe Publishing Procedures Course, a very prestigious program. There were four black students out of 70. The group was mostly women with about six men. Since its inception in 1947, it had prepared many women who became active in publishing, but had not had any black students for almost a decade before my year. One speaker told us the men would start as assistant editors and "all you girls" as secretaries. Back then, we didn't even think to challenge that. (Most of us wanted to work at Conde Nast -- I certainly did, but I already had a job. "Mademoiselle" magazine was the pinnacle.) That program is at Columbia now.

I took several language classes. Spanish, French. But I dropped Swahili-students had demanded the course. Arthur Zeiger thought it was a wonderful idea.

Leo Hamalian, Leonard Kriegel and Frederick Karl were also good teachers. Addison Gayle was one of the few black members of the English department, but he taught mostly in the SEEK program.

Samuel Middlebrook was dean of the Faculty. I audited his course in the transcendentalists, Hawthorn and Melville -reading Moby Dick for fun. I loved it. I never took Milton-there was always a schedule conflict, and if I couldn't take it with Samuel Mintz, there was no point.

I love the Victorians. I am in a book group now which reads mostly Black authors. We have been meeting for close to 30 years.

H. Rapp Brown told us, if you go to the White anti-war protests, you will stand out. They will lob the tear gas at you.

There was much more open space on the CCNY campus than there is now. There was a South Campus lawn and open spaces around the old Sacred Heart buildings.
Lewisohn Stadium was a huge amphitheater where the North Academic Center is located now. There were graduation ceremonies, sports, ROTC, and summer concerts. Among the concerts I remember, starting at around age five: the opera singers Lily Pons and Marian Anderson (whom we listened to on radio --Milton Cross hosting the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts), Louis Armstrong playing "St. Louis Blues" with the New York Philharmonic (he was so moved that he cried), various ballet performances, many Rogers and Hammerstein Nights and Lerner and Lowe Nights.

Across the street, where the science center and the athletic building are located, was a huge open space, Jasper Oval, where the teams practiced, ROTC drilled, and people played handball, lacrosse and other sports. It was there that my mother tried to teach me to play tennis with my first racquet, at about age eight: I was hopeless (I'm still hopeless). At the Stadium, there were graduation ceremonies, sports, more ROTC, and summer concerts.

I remember seeing President Buell Gallagher in his academic robes with gold trim, carrying his mace, leading graduation processions, and the discarded cap and gown boxes on the North Campus Quad (it was part of the tradition). I was really disappointed that our graduation was in Madison Square Garden's Felt Forum. I wanted it to be like the graduations I saw growing up. I love the majestic architecture of CCNY, the old Gothic buildings, the arches and gates, and I loved South Campus: Mott Hall, home of the English department, the Finley Student Center and the President's House, where Gallagher lived on campus, just inside the gate at 133 St. and Convent Ave.

Because of my familiarity with City College's campus, etc., I had no idea I was attending "First Generation U.," and if I had, I might have made a different choice, especially in view of open admissions. Nonetheless, how fortunate we all were to have had free tuition. I have since met people who grew up near CCNY, and who graduated just a few years after me, who said they had "no idea what they did there," and assumed that it was only for white people. Needless to say, my experience was nothing like that.
I was born in Harlem, NY in 1948 and the family resided there until the end of 1960. We lived at the north end of Central Park on 110th Street between 7th and 8th Avenues. My father’s grandfather and early family traveled in covered wagons to Kansas from the mid-west after the Civil War. The traveling group was made up of three families, one of which was the Simms family, early relatives of Paul Simms, whom I later met when I joined the Tech News staff at The City College of New York. My father was a life-long working musician, raised in Newton, Kansas, who had traveled throughout the country with popular dance bands in the 1930s and 1940s. He graduated from high school in 1933, at time when a high school education was somewhat rare among black people, and was more rigorous than many of our country’s college programs are today. In 1932 he placed 3rd in the All Kansas Music Festival held in Emporia, KS. Later, upon settling in New York City after World War II, he also became a career civil servant, working as a Brooklyn bus driver for the New York Transit Authority. Music was my father’s passion, however, and he continued to play trumpet in local New York dance bands and, in his retirement, provided dinner music at local restaurants until his passing in 1989.

My mother was raised in Detroit, Michigan. Her mother was a trained concert pianist who had studied music at a German conservatory, and who opened the first African American music school in the state of Michigan. Her father was an entrepreneur who published a local Detroit newspaper Our People, and who founded the first state recognized employment agency for people of color in Michigan. My mother attended Howard University for three years as a young woman, and in her retirement years at age 62 returned to school to become a well known psychologist in the senior community of Rancho Bernardo, California. In between those years she served in the 1950s as a radio personality on station KOV, broadcast from the Palm Café on 125th Street in New York, was a singer and entertainer in local supper clubs, and in the mid 1960s wrote a weekly column for The Queens Voice. When I was a child my grandmother from Michigan lived with us for a few years, and worked as a bookkeeper for Blue Note Records. My mother became their publicity and public relations manager, and in later years married the founder of the company.

During my childhood my sister and I were raised in modest circumstances but with high expectations. At the same time, at a very young age, we were made painfully aware of the many obstacles and difficulties we would face trying to achieve our dreams. My sister and I were born in the mid and late 1940s at a time when black men were regularly being lynched in the South, where there were no open housing laws, limited educational opportunities, no voting rights, no accommodations at public restaurants, hotels, rest rooms, or drinking fountains. We were blessed to have been raised in New York where such things weren’t quite so prevalent, but everyone was more or less restricted to black neighborhoods, knew that their neighborhood schools were sub-standard, and was well aware of the injustices inflicted upon our people.

At PS 113, where I attended primary school, two very important teachers were Mrs. Young (2nd grade) and Miss Cumberbatch (both 4th and 5th grades). Although there were many good teachers at PS 113, I credit these two women with making school and learning a thoroughly pleasant and enjoyable experience.
My family moved to Corona, Queens during the second half of the 6th grade, and I was assigned to an elementary school, and on to junior high school, in Jackson Heights, a community with very few black families at that time. I became immediately, and painfully, aware that there was a great disparity between the academic standards of the 98% black school in Harlem in which I was one of the top students, and the 98% caucasian school in Jackson Heights. Aside from having to pick up my game, it was a good and early introduction to many other religions and cultures from Jewish, to Greek, to Italian, to Irish, etc.

From there I attended Julia Richman High School on 67th Street and 2nd Avenue in Manhattan, once again associating with a broad mix of students of different ethnic and religious backgrounds, this time additionally adding friends from various Caribbean and South American countries, as well as Russia, South Africa, and Asia. What was relevant for me during those junior high and high school years, from the study of English point of view, was that I developed a life-long love of reading, and over later years the ability to write a grammatically correct, concise, and yet hopefully entertaining sentence. I graduated from Julia Richman in 1966. One of the enduring images that I have of the school is the inscription over the main door “Knowledge is Power.”

It was my intention to attend City College from the beginning, but my mother was not in favor of my choice. The first problem was that she was quite unaware of the tremendous educational and intellectual power-house that City was. But in addition she expressed the opinion, rather vehemently, that she did not move the family out of the ghetto just to have me go back every day to college. She considered the area dangerous, which of course it was from time to time, but I was not concerned with that as much as she was. In fact, I guess I was not concerned with that matter at all.

I originally transferred to City College after a freshman year at the Zeckendorf campus of Long Island University in Brooklyn. After a year of drifting at loose ends at LIU, and a few other life changes, I arrived at City and the office of Tech News. I transferred to City in the fall of 1967, and spent some time as an evening student, while working full time first as a fabric cutter for an East Village boutique, and then as a clerk at a very large midtown life insurance company. Sewing has been one of my interests since I was about five years old, and working in a clothing factory very early in my career helped refine my skills. The City College evening program was primarily populated by other adults with full-time jobs. We arrived from our jobs eager to learn but fatigued and hungry, usually after a long subway ride during the height of the evening rush hour, and were hoping that the professors would take that into consideration. The faculty, however, wasn’t having any of that, and we were expected to perform to the same high standards as the day students. I switched to full-time day-student status in the fall of 1969.

Going to City was like going to educational heaven, albeit heaven with a lot of political and racial discrimination type problems that needed straightening out as soon as possible! Those were the days when we were still a relatively small minority on campus, with very few minority instructors, no ethnic studies and the school administration’s attitude that “we don’t need any, either, thank you very much!!” As a major in the History department, I found this particularly disturbing and intolerable. Of course, I loved the gothic architecture, was in awe of the Great Hall where all class registration took place each semester (back in the dark ages before on-line
registration and on-line everything else), and found a home away from home in the Finley Student Center. During those years I lived in a rented room in an elderly lady’s apartment on 137th Street between Broadway and Riverside Drive, and trudged up the hill to City on 135th Street.

I had the very good fortune of working as a student aide at City in the office of Benjamin Karr, a psychologist by training, who was the Graduate Student Financial Aid Officer at that time. Dr. Karr was one of those liberal guys who was a teenager during the height of union organizing in the 1930's, and had his finger on the pulse of what was hot and happening politically at City. I am not sure if he played any role in the negotiations involving minority students and the administration during 1968 & 1969, but he knew where to steer me, and the right people for me to meet.

It was Dr. Karr who, in September of 1969, introduced me to the Ombudsman (a Black gentleman whose name I can't remember off of the top of my head, but whose office was created around 1969 to help deal with student concerns) who then took me around to the Tech News office. There I met Paul Simms (who turned out to be a distant relative), Francee Covington, Louis Reyes Rivera, James Fleshman, Ray Frost, Jeff Morgan, Greg Holder, Tom McDonald, Bob Feaster, and others. I was a member of the Tech News/The Paper staff until August of 1971.

It was a fascinating, and bold, move on Paul's part as to how he "infiltrated" Tech News, and ultimately, with the help of like-minded friends, turned the former engineering students’ paper into the voice of minority students on campus. But one of the virtues of the “new” Tech News was that it did not only concern itself with the reporting of City College events, but evolved into a publication reporting on national and international events and issues from a unique perspective.

Quite a few of the people at "our" Tech News were involved in off-campus local, national, and international political activities, and they, under the leadership of Paul Simms and the subsequent editors-in-chief, collectively brought a power-house of organizing know-how, political connections, and writing skills to the Tech News enterprise. Among the Tech News staff were the Feaster brothers, one of whom, later known as Sekou Sundiata, has sadly already passed away. His brother is still with us, however, and will have much to add. Then there is, of course, the loss of Louis Rivera, Bob Knight and Jerry Mondesire.

Until I joined Tech News I did not consider myself much of a writer (and indeed, was not), and had no prior thought of journalism. Of course, joining Tech News at the time that I did, I was very familiar with Louis. I was his friend, as well as his student. Louis was very generous with his time and talent with all of the Tech News rookies. He had been writing for quite a few years, and knew how to critique the writing of others. He had a sense of organization, and in a short period of time had learned all aspects of putting out a newspaper. In his heart Louis was a poet, and he shared with me that he was greatly influenced by his grandmother, who encouraged his interest in writing from the age of about 5 or 6.

Louis was one of the key individuals working with Paul Simms when I joined the staff in the Fall of 1969, and he became editor-in-chief when the first generation, (Paul, Jane, and Francee,
among others) had graduated. In addition, Louis was very much a part of the political scene involving minority concerns at City, as well as the country at large. That much is also true, however, for most of the staff at that time. Otherwise, in those early days you wouldn’t have even been on the staff. The two just went hand in hand. Being on the staff of Tech News was a radical thing, in and of itself. In about 1970, we renamed Tech News as The Paper. And because of the reputation and activities of staff members, the paper office became the hang-out for quite a few “friends” of The Paper, who enjoyed the vibe and energy created in our office on the third floor of the now demolished Finley Hall.

In order to have a full understanding of what Tech News/The Paper was and became over several years, it is important to know the academic background, abilities, motivations, and vision of the original founders and editors before Louis, as well as those very important editors who picked up the mantle after Louis, such as Albert DeLeon.

Regarding English teachers at City College, I can’t say that I was influenced or affected in any memorable way by any of them. After the first one or two required English classes, I went my own way with the readings that I thought were important, and over time developed my own writing style. That is not to say that I would not have benefited greatly from taking more of the English classes available at City. At this point I can clearly see the loss. But the fact of the matter is that while at City my main English, reporting, and creative writing teachers were Paul Simms, Tom McDonald, Louis Rivera, Bob Collazo, Francee Covington, Jerry Mondesire, and Joudon Ford. And my writing contemporaries were Albert De Leon (who later became editor-in-chief), Maxine Alexander (a wonderful, no-nonsense, young woman who wrote the Black, No Sugar column), Charles Powell, David Caldwell, and David Friedlander, among others. And I gained an understanding of graphics, page layout, and photography from Ray Frost and Jeff Morgan.

I feel the need to add here that in the course of completing writing assignments for any academic classes at the City College of the 60s and early 70s, it was expected that one followed all of the rules of grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc., and the assigned paper would be graded on that basis, just as well as on subject matter. One was, indeed, expected to arrive as freshmen with these skills already developed and ready to be expanded and embellished, not learned for the first time. Of course, there were other opinions about whether this should be a pre-requisite for college entrance, and along with other factors, that debate led to open enrollment.

From my perspective, there weren’t any teachers (English, or otherwise) who were involved in the development of The Paper, or actively involved in the day-to-day activities of the staff. Of course, there must have been professors who held and supported our political point of view and activities, etc., but I just didn’t personally know any of them. Joudon Ford had had some political discussions with Professor Broadfield, though. I knew that we had a faculty advisor, but I never personally met him, nor did I ever see him in the office. It must be the case that the editors had contact with the advisor, and I recommend that the matter be discussed further with Albert DeLeon and Paul Simms. Similarly, there weren’t any particular faculty members guiding my developing thoughts about politics, or frankly speaking, my growing outrage over the problems our society faces but won’t face up to, then as well as now.
Upon further thought on this subject, I do remember a Dean who headed up President Marshak’s campus drug policy committee, as well as an African American sociology professor who served on that committee. Francee Covington, Joudon Ford and I, from The Paper, as well as several members from student government, and the student population at large, came together to formulate an official set of policies to deal with the growing problem of drug use on campus. But even in that situation, the Dean and faculty member were not involved in directing, or supporting in any way, a particular political agenda. Personally, after the protests of 1969 and the negotiations ending the takeover of the administration building, I think the staff of The Paper were more or less tolerated, and given a fairly wide berth.

Aside from taking classes and working on Tech News/The Paper, most of the staffers held outside paying jobs, participated in other extracurricular activities, and some of them were raising young children. Paul Simms, James Fleshman, and others organized the National Black Science Students Organization, Albert DeLeon was a member of the CCNY Varsity Baseball team, Joudon Ford was a member of the CCNY Varsity Fencing team, while holding down a job as a late-night tow truck driver, and Maxine Alexander was involved in various other campus groups, including establishing a campus day care center, while also raising a toddler. Most of the other staff members were similarly engaged in campus related, and off-campus activities.

During the time that I entered the college, admission was based on grade point average, SAT scores, etc., which of course was rather exclusionary, and the reason some were demanding a more open admissions policy. Some members of The Paper staff were SEEK students, but that was not something that we dwelled on, or to my recollection talked about much, or that made any material difference to the content or high quality of the work. In fact, I later learned that some of the key staff members of The Paper were SEEK students such as Francee Covington and Ray Frost.

Joudon Ford came to City College with his political credentials already in hand. He was a bright high-schooler with a sense of righteous indignation about injustice, and the nerve to do something rather risky about it. Several people on staff knew him from his SNCC and Black Panther days, but most were not so aware of his talent for the written and spoken word until he joined Tech News/The Paper. In Don’s case, though, English was an academic subject that he relished and took seriously. Along the way we took each other seriously as well, and ultimately after a 36-year lapse in communication, picked up where we left off. We thank Albert DeLeon for our fortunate re-introduction, though Albert was unaware at the time that he was acting as match-maker.

After graduating from City College in 1971, I left New York, and as it turned out, never returned except to occasionally visit family and friends. I attended graduate schools in Ithaca, NY and in Denver, CO. I married while living in Denver, moved with my husband and two daughters to Washington, DC, Charlottesville, VA, Seattle, WA, Boston, MA, and Los Angeles, CA. I remained in Los Angeles after a divorce until relocating to Las Vegas, NV fifteen years ago in February of 2002. It was while living in the Los Angeles area that my home was damaged during the 1994 Northridge earthquake. Various members of the family had always been interested in seismology and earth sciences, but I can tell you that no amount of interest or casual study prepares a person for the real thing. My oldest daughter is an art curator, author, and
assistant professor at UCSD, in La Jolla, CA, who splits her time between the United States and Europe. My younger daughter was a member of the women’s varsity basketball teams in both high school and college, and is a teacher and sports coach in the public schools of Wayne County, NC. She has led several of her teams as far as the state championships.

My primary career has been in the insurance industry, mainly as a Pension Administrator at various actuarial consulting firms around the country. In “retirement” I am an independent licensed life and health insurance agent in Nevada, specializing in plans under Medicare and The Affordable Care Act, as well as helping families set up final arrangement plans. In 2003 I founded the Southern Nevada Chapter of The City College Alumni Association. One of our main goals is to raise scholarship funds for deserving but needy students currently at City College. To date we have donated over $25,000 to that cause. In addition, I now serve as co-chairman, with Albert De Leon, on a committee of former staffers that has created, in conjunction with The City College 21st Century Foundation, a scholarship fund in the name of The Paper. The initial goal is to raise $25,000 for an endowment that will generate a scholarship of $1,250 per year, in perpetuity, to help needy students. An additional future goal is to raise enough money to provide stipends to allow students to work in non-paying summer internships, and to provide equipment and book awards. Donations to this fund will qualify as charitable contributions to an IRS 501(c)(3) organization for federal income tax purposes. Contribution checks made out to The 21st Century Fund, and indicating in the Notes section of the check “For The Paper Scholarship at CCNY,” should be addressed to:

Ms. Leslie Skyba
Office of Develop. & Institutional Advancement
The City College of New York
160 Convent Avenue
New York, NY 10031
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566


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