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Interview with Allen Ballard
Interviewer: Douglas Medina

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Douglas Medina: Today is Friday, April 4th, 2014, and I am here with Professor Allen Ballard. Professor Ballard, why don't we start with you telling me about yourself? Where did you grow up?

Allen Ballard: I grew up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and I was born in 1930 – November 1, 1930 – and grew up in Pennsylvania, and went to the Joseph E. Hill Elementary School, and went to Central High School in Philadelphia, and graduated from there in 1948 – February.

Medina: And what did your parents do at that time for a living?

Ballard: My father was a police inspector, and my mother was basically a Christian Science nurse.

Douglas Medina: Did you discuss politics at home, at the dinner table when you were together?

Allen Ballard: No.

Douglas Medina: So how did you think of race at the time, in terms of your interaction with people in your neighborhood, at school?

Allen Ballard: Well, I'll tell you something: if we're going along with this, I think you should read my book. I mean, because a lot of this is covered in extreme detail in my book.

Douglas Medina: Okay, so you know what, maybe we will skip that part. So, why don't we fast forward to the time when you first arrived at the City University.

Allen Ballard: I arrived in City University in 1960 or so. I arrived at City College in New York as an assistant professor of Political Science and as a Soviet specialist. I taught Soviet Politics, then of course all the American government and international relations – I taught everything.

Douglas Medina: You said 1960 – was that exactly 1960, or 1961, when CUNY became a university?

Allen Ballard: Probably '61 –'60 or '61 – but I don't have my vitae in front of me, which I will send it to you; it's got all that extra detail in it.

Douglas Medina: How many black faculty members do you recall were in the department at the time?

Allen Ballard: In the entire school, there were three black faculty members. There was myself; there was John Davis in the Political Science department; and there was Kenneth Clark in the Psychology department. That was it.

Douglas Medina: And what about students? I know that the demographics were very skewed; it was mostly a white institution, right?

Allen Ballard: Yeah. There were no – very few black students; I had, in my first five years at City College, I think maybe about three or four, at the most, black students in my day classes. There were a few more in my evening classes, because we all taught evening school at that same time. But in my evening classes, sometimes there are more, but no more than – I can remember almost by names, the names of the black undergraduates in my class.

Douglas Medina: At what point did you begin to mobilize, or address, the issue of racial inequality in terms of access to City College as an institution?

Allen Ballard: Well, I did that basically when – I got the idea to start the SEEK program. And what I did, I went to John Davis. He was a senior black person on campus; really more senior than Ken Clark. And he was, you know, like a mentor to me, so I had this idea to kind of creating something like what the SEEK program is actually. And I asked him, what he would think if I went and talked to the president about it? And he said don't worry about it, just go on and write it up and go talk to the president, which I did. Now this is '63 I think; '63, '64. The president, Buell Gallagher, agreed that this was a necessary step to

take; he, too, had already noticed the racial gap and he said to me that he had actually asked Ken Clark to set up such a program, but that Ken had not had the time to do it. And so, the president told me "Go ahead and write the whole thing up," and he would actually deal with it. He would pick it up and move it once he'd received it; well, it would really put then into the hand off the undergraduate dean, who was Dean Frodin. And then, the university set up a committee, and on that committee was Dean Bernie Sohmer – he is dead now – and myself, and Dean Leslie Berger, who was to become the first director of SEEK. And, we were all put under the control of Dean Abe Schwartz, a very distinguished professor of Mathematics and who had himself – he basically was the chair of this committee, whose job was to formulate the SEEK program. And in that whole structure, I was the one who basically wrote the plan, with, obviously, input from all those folks. Dean Berger was then a dean in the evening school under Dean Schwartz –basically then Leslie Berger was made the first director of the SEEK program; and that was the organizational structure.

Douglas Medina: Were there any differences between what you initially proposed and what became the SEEK program?

Allen Ballard: Probably not at this stage of the game. I mean, they would all have to be down on paper, but it's pretty much what I proposed is what we got. We had, I think, the ratio of counselors and the kind of academic components of this kind of mixture of academic counseling, and financial assistance, and books, and basic kinds of drawing out, seeking out youth who had great potential, and doing it on an individual basis; that was all there. That whole component was there now; there may have been adjustments, budget-wise, you know, how much money they would get for the books; how much money they would get for tuition. And it was the type to ask what kind of class; the way the classes would be structured. But the basic structure was there, and we had all agreed upon that.

Douglas Medina: You mentioned the counseling component, which I think is one of the most important components of SEEK, even today. And it's interesting because when I read some of the literature and the history of SEEK and open admissions, that was one of the points of contention that the students raised; because there is a difference between having a counselor, who has a psychological background, training, and one who has academic advisement training. And they felt that – or at least that is what some people said – they felt that students were viewed as deficient, psychologically deficient, if you had a counselor talking to them, as opposed to an advisor or a social worker. What do you think about that?

Allen Ballard: Well, there was a form of contention, let me put it this way, but it was not – and this was because Dean Berger basically was a psychologist, and a very good psychologist. And he felt that we should bring the most highly trained professionals that were available. And he didn't think it that the students were mentally deficient, at all. He just thought that trained clinicians would be better able to deal with the problems that the kids would bring; and could offer them, let's put it this way, a very professional kind of outlet for whatever things bothered them. Now, he and I differed on that a lot, but never in a cantankerous way at all. But Les' approach was just, let's get the best PhD people around here we can get, and the problem was – he, at the same time, wanted to establish the prestige of the program, so that it would not be looked down upon by other components in the college. At that time, you couldn't find any black PhD academic counselors, or PhD whatever. Yeah, we argued a lot about that, and again in a very friendly way, and sooner or later he was persuaded that we could bring in social workers, but that was a big step for him. Because again, he felt that there was a – and I think he was right, in a certain respect definitely in a way; that there is a certain rigidity in our structures that comes with having the discipline to get a PhD. And he thought that this would transfer to a certain rigorousness in the entire program; that's why he wanted to push on that.

Douglas Medina: Interesting. That makes a lot of sense, actually. By the way, would you happen to have some of the original reports and documents? I've found some material, but it would be great to get it from you as well, if you have it. If not, that is fine.

Allen Ballard: I may have some stuff. Sooner or later I have to give my permission to the archives here at the University of Albany, but they have a lot of my stuff actually.

Douglas Medina: Great; I will take a look, then, if that is the case. So you mentioned that – to me it makes a lot of sense that the program from the very foundation should be given credibility?

Allen Ballard: Right.

Douglas Medina: That is the important factor. Now, tell me more about any opposition that you may have encountered in the process of making this proposal to create SEEK.

Allen Ballard: Well, let me say this – again, I go onto the book. In the book, I go into some great detail about this. On the campus itself, there was opposition, as far as in the faculty council; not racial, but aimed at again the standards – the question of standards, the question of

lowering the standards. You have to remember what City College was – this place had all these various high Nobel Prize winners– and it prided itself on its academic excellence. A lot of the professors were CCNY graduates, who had gone on to Harvard or Columbia, particularly Columbia, and there was a wellspring of opposition on that. "Are you going to lower standards?" It's still the same question today; it hasn't changed at all, really. How are you going to actually see to it that City College remains the actual kind of City College that we have now.

Through this, you can't have both, realistically; things are going to change. There was no real opposition in the college about whose, but indeed there was a lot of support for the program from all parts of it. Actually, one of the people who became the most adamant opponents against the SEEK program, against Open Admissions was Howard Adelson. Adelson was in the History department; he's actually a very good friend of mine; we enjoyed talking history and things together. He actually volunteered to be a tutor, a mentor to some of those students; and he changed – he got irritated when some of them stopped showing up for meetings with him. Frankly, he was very easily offended. He became later vehemently against this whole program, but he was a very good friend of mine.

So actually, as time went on and as more students came in, and some of them didn't perform well, and some of them failed to meet the expectations, then you would begin getting resentment against the program; that's really what happened. I think, by and large, the white – well, the faculty was white, but the faculty supported the program; let me put it that way. And a lot of – he had to remember the time – again this is still after the war and there are a lot of veterans; we didn't have professors or associates for professors, whatever. There were a lot of veterans had been through a lot, and who basically are very – by virtue of, I think, their war experience, or the worldliness of them – they were prepared to see change take place; and they helped.

Douglas Medina: Wow. Now, did you seek any outside support from community organizations for this project? Because it seems to me that if you are going to start with a program like SEEK, you would need community support, so that people know about it– so that there's a broader support base for it; did any of that occur?

Allen Ballard: Yeah, it occurred, but it occurred in a way, how can I say it, primarily through the political black politicians. That is how the support came, from Basil Paterson and Charlie Rangel and Percy Sutton – I am leaving somebody out.

Douglas Medina: Adam Clayton Powell?

Allen Ballard: No, he wasn't. David Dinkins. All of those four were the four of whom I was in contact, and who really provided the political muscle for the program. Now, they all had contacts in the community– but there was no real – at that time, there was no Black community besides those folks and the churches, there was no Black community organizations, such as Haryou-Act, which came in later. When Ken Clark came in, there was a different ball game. But there were still – the primary community support came through, actually, the politicians.

Douglas Medina: Interesting. Now, in many ways, SEEK was the model for what would later become open admissions, and it seems like things happened so quickly. Because SEEK was established in – I believe 1966 was the first year that the first class was brought in. So, at what point, from your recollections, do you remember students mobilizing for expanding SEEK? For getting more students access to CUNY?

Allen Ballard: Well, all that is in my books too – I mean all that's covered in brief in (0:20:26 indiscernible). Basically, the death of Martin Luther King precipitated all of that. From then on, that's when students really got very active. As the Black students came in, and the Puerto Rican students came in, they noticed the lack of Black and Puerto Rican students on the campus. So now, then they start saying, hey, let's just have more, more, more. So that's what that was about, realistically. I mean, the ones who were there became a catalyst for change. That's how that happened.

Douglas Medina: Okay. You mentioned before that this idea of academic standards always came up as the factor that was the main opposition, usually from faculty. They would say, yeah, you get all these students coming in, then the standards will suffer. And, at the same time there's a contradiction of sorts here, because CUNY always has presented itself, historically, as the Harvard of the poor, working class students can, are welcome here. Except if you're black and Puerto Rican, you're not necessarily in. But my question is this: do you remember any of these debates about access connected to the idea of CUNY's mission as a public institution?

Allen Ballard: I mean, that was an underlying theme in all of the kind of policy positions taken by the black and Puerto Rican politicians, and by that whole side. I mean, that's an underlying theme. It's like – holding Thomas Jefferson to the Declaration of Independence. It's the same thing, really. I mean, it was just pervasive as we went into office.

Douglas Medina: Now, ultimately, we got Open Admissions. But interestingly enough, the demands that the students presented to the administrators, to the president, did not include the language of Open Admissions. What they called for, and this is demand number four, was equal, proportionate representation of incoming students who were admitted into City College in CUNY to reflect the proportion of the black and Puerto Rican population in New York City. But those are two different things, aren't they? Open admissions and proportionate admissions; what do you think led to that?

Allen Ballard: What led to Open Admissions, or what led to the proportion to their demands?

Douglas Medina: Actually, both, but let's go with what led to Open Admissions.

Allen Ballard: Well, what led to Open Admissions was – again, you'll see in my book as I talk about this. The demands from the students, and all these demonstrations basically, provided the – all over the place – the others [without]didn't have no peace at all. Every time you turn around, there's [were] students demonstrating, right here, they're everywhere, "bum-buto- bum-bum". Yeah, you couldn't sleep, man. It's like, you're thinking well, who, what are they going to do the next day? So, it was almost like Kiev, that's how, it's just like Kiev a few weeks ago.

And, you know, you're feeling like the Prime Minister of Ukraine: what the hell am I going to do with all of these folks. So that's what led to it. I mean, that was it. But then, there was a liberal – no question about it – there was a liberal kind of context. And that includes Bowker, and it includes the administration. And I talk about this, again, in some detail. It included all those votes who were basically inclined towards changing the composition of the university, and who also saw the change in composition of the city taking place, and slow-rising political – black and Puerto Rican political power.

These things are all tied up together, in a situation where they had to appease the white constituencies of the city. And that meant, in effect, that we're now talking about Queens College. Brooklyn College. Lehman College, which was newly founded. But basically, Brooklyn and Hunter and Queens, which were the basis of the university – those places had to be [appeased]– and their constituencies, which are overwhelmingly white.

Brooklyn still had – was not, basically what it was. And the Bronx was what it was, too. These are – the city is changing, but it's not changing that fast. So, how are you going to satisfy them? And they basically didn't want large numbers of blacks and Puerto Ricans,

underachieving students coming into their colleges. They all held their college at a high, high reputation. But they can't – it's a mistake not to see that the Presidents in all these places – the names escape me now, It was Wexler down at Hunter, right, Lief in the Bronx, Murphy out at Queens College.

These folks all had their own kind of liberal tendencies, but they also were – had huge alumni associations behind them, and they were White. And they had to deal with the alumni associations; they had to deal with a faculty that was not used to all this turmoil. So basically, Open Admissions was a compromise, that's what it ended up being.

Douglas Medina: Right. And it seems like it was middle, White working class students and families who benefited from Open Admissions.

Allen Ballard: Yes, large numbers of them. Yes. That was the in other, the quid pro quo. Really, that's what happened.

Douglas Medina: It's interesting also, because, as you know, there was a plan already in the works that Bowker had crafted, I believe; and it was presented in the Master Plan of 1968, calling for the implementation of an Open Admissions program in 1975. So, in some ways, the social movement led by students pushed that deadline forward – in 1970.

Allen Ballard: Definitely.

Douglas Medina: So, you know, now here's where it gets really interesting. In the research that I've done –I have not found any work that makes an explicit, in-depth connection between Open Admissions and the imposition of tuition.

Allen Ballard: Right.

Douglas Medina: To me, it seems interesting that 1970 is when Open Admissions was implemented, and 1976 – six short years later, the imposition of tuition came about. There are some theories out there that basically say, well, look at how the complexion of the university changed, and then you get tuition. What do you think about that, I mean is there any weight to that theory that says it was a racist policy in many ways: the imposition of tuition?

Allen Ballard: Yeah, I think there is, no question it was. In my mind, there was no question it was. I don't know – again, I see in my mind the board meetings; I think I was there when that board meeting took place. There were three or four vehement anti-Black and anti-Puerto Rican board members. And the, there were, three or four vehemently anti-

Black and anti-Puerto Rican board members. I can see one of them, right now, I forgot what his name was – he was pounding his fist on the table when the final vote was announced, and with joy. And he raised his hands. There are graduates so – former graduates of the City College. I see a guy, I see him right now. And there's no question in my mind it was racial. It was racial.

Douglas Medina: Interesting. So, that was a watershed moment in CUNY's history because it was the end of a 129-year old policy of no tuition. You know, a lot of people attended because it was free, otherwise they would not have been able to attend, right?

Allen Ballard: That's right.

Douglas Medina: At the same time it occurred in the context of one of the most serious fiscal crises that New York City has faced; they were almost bankrupt, right?

Allen Ballard: That's true.

Douglas Medina: So, I'm wondering to what extent racism had something to do with the imposition of tuition, and to what extent the fiscal crisis was a catalyst.

Allen Ballard: Well, you know – it's like White – all things are, I'm not going to say – I'm not going to sit here and say it was – let me say this, the university, in open admissions, bit off more than it could chew. Alright, we didn't have the money to do it. Which is why, when you read – you see that I wrote – now, I was opposed to open admissions, which was going to drown the university, rather than having a targeted kind of program, such as SEEK, and continuing that.

So the result of all this was that the university was not funded properly, and the place really kind of deteriorated; no question about it. It was just in awful physical shape. And so they needed money, but there was none. So I'm not going to sit here and say it was totally a racial kind of decision, but I will say that – and as a historian, you can't say I wish it had been this, I wish it was that. It was exactly what it was.

It was probably a comp… these folks who had been against open admissions felt, "Hey, at least now we're going to make them pay for it, right." At the same time, as these same folks who were against open admissions were fiscally conservative people anyhow, most of them bankers or whatever, you know, whatever they were. So they may have – these forces may have conspired.

So I'm not going to say it was totally that; that would be wrong.

Douglas Medina: Yeah, of course. It was a complex issue and complex time in many ways. There were so many moving pieces at the time. So, do you remember what the role politicians played, and which ones in particular, played a role in the imposition of tuition? Because in some ways I recall reading that some Black politicians agreed with the policy, but with a caveat that the state had to provide funding for minorities through TAP, the Tuition Assistance Program.

Allen Ballard: I don't remember who that was. I don't – no I guess that would just be – I don't remember.

Douglas Medina: Okay. So let's move to sort of talking in more abstract terms here, because it seems to me that there's a big issue here in terms of the idea of meritocracy, and the language of standards. – I think that's really how you see it – and the idea of democratic access which, I think the students represented at the time in 1969.

That tension came to a head in 1969. The students basically challenged the whole idea of meritocracy, didn't they?

Allen Ballard: Right.

Douglas Medina: So that tension seems to continue; it was never really resolved, right?

Allen Ballard: Right.

Douglas Medina: What do you think about that? I mean, how do we solve that tension between meritocratic standards and democratic goals?

Allen Ballard: Well, you can't – realistically, it's everything. We have a EOP program [Educational Opportunity Program] here at SUNY Albany. And I go there all the time for those meetings. We had a meeting – not a meeting, this honors program, you know, dinner for this graduating seniors, et cetera. And, you know, some folks got up and who are staff – there were some people got up who were EOP graduates, early ones, and they talked about where their children were.

And then someone said, maybe remark in a nice way, they said, "That's great." Because an EOP graduate should not have children who are EOP. In other words, that's what happened, basically you see that that was the whole purpose of setting up a upwardly mobile, facilitating program. That was the whole purpose of it: to invest funds and get it open out there; they're kind of investors, so that they would

be able to move higher in life, and into a higher economic status, and social status.

I think that's basically what the programs have achieved. Now, it's certainly – you can see still a disparity – Lenin used to say, you can't make your eggs without breaking an omelet. [sic] And that's just true. There's no way that you're going to have a situation where you have generations of Whites who have been nurtured in certain literary traditions today, and whose parents are literate and read – and have had access to the books, and concerts, and things of the sort. There's no way you're going to take those folks and their values, and the leisure time that they and their children have for broadening their own education.

That's been transmitted to the lives of peasants from Africa, or the descendants of slaves from Africa, or peasants from Puerto Rico, and all of a sudden expecting, "Oh hey, we're one big happy family." It doesn't work like that. It works through time. There's a melding together of these things, and it's like, one Puerto Rican doctor here, one Black doctor here, one Black PhD in physics, et cetera et cetera, or economists. These things are kind of cumulative and slow. It's not like, all of a sudden, you bring somebody into the university, and then they graduate – Phi Beta Kappa is going to happen. It does happen; we have a large number of Dean's List who are students on the EOP program up here. A lot of them, actually. But you can't suddenly expect that the university is not going to be changed. It's going to be changed.

Douglas Medina: Absolutely right. You mentioned upward mobility. It's interesting because the concept of upward mobility – and its sibling, the American Dream – they usually go hand in hand, upward mobility and the American Dream – are both inflicted with class and race factors. The issue of access to higher education is both a racial and a class issue. I wonder because to me, that's an important point, because in American society, we tend to think of access in terms of racial terms, and not necessarily in terms of the class perspective. For example, colleges and universities are heading towards full privatization nowadays.

You know, public institutions – more and more students are expected to pay out of their pockets for supporting the mission of the institution. That process in my mind began in the 1960s and the 1970s; and that's why I'm using CUNY as a case study for this.

Allen Ballard: Right.

Douglas Medina: So what I'm saying is that, yeah, fine, let's focus on diversity; multiculturalism is a good thing; upward mobility is a good thing. But let's also look at the way capitalism works. We haven't really talked about that. So, I'm wondering what your thoughts are about this issue. How can we focus on upward mobility, but at the same time, question the very notion of upward mobility; a critique of capitalism, let's say.

Allen Ballard: That's off my – that's off the reservation. I mean, we'd be here forever. Seriously, right at this stage of the game. Because it's class, and it's economics, and my politics are kind of far left, but not quite socialist. I support most of the things that were done to bring around leveling. But I also lived in the Soviet Union for a long time. I studied there and stuff. And each side has its advantage, whatever.

Douglas Medina: Right.

Allen Ballard: So, I'll let that one just slide, it's difficult.

[00:42:47]