



CUNY Digital History Archive
An Oral History of the CCNY 1960's SEEK

Interview with Allen B. Ballard
Interviewer: Sean Molloy

June 5, 2015

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 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.

Title Card: How Did It Begin?

Allen B. Ballard: 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.

**** *

Ballard: 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.

**** *

Ballard: 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.

**** *

Ballard: 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....

**** *

Ballard: 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.

**** *

Ballard: 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, its 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]

Title Card: Who Shaped the Program?

Ballard: 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.

**** *

Ballard: 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.

**** *

Ballard: [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.

**** *

Ballard: 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....

**** *

Ballard: 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.

**** *

Ballard: 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.

**** *

Ballard: 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]

Title Card: How Did you Choose SEEK students?

Ballard: 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.

**** *

Ballard: 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?

**** *

Ballard: 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]

**** *

Ballard: 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.

Title Card: How Did SEEK Work?

Ballard: 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?

**** *

Ballard: 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.

**** *

Ballard: 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.

**** *

Ballard: 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.

**** *

Ballard: 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.

**** *

Ballard: 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.

**** *

Ballard: 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.

**** *

Ballard: 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.

**** *

Ballard: 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.

**** *

Ballard: [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.

Title Card: 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.

**** *

Ballard: 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.

**** *

Ballard: 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....

**** *

Ballard: 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.

**** *

Ballard: 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...

**** *

Ballard: “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?

Title Card: Who Were These SEEK students?

Ballard: [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.

**** *

Ballard: But he was very creative, ah he was creative—smart as a whip, as was Louis Rivera.

**** *

Ballard: 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.

**** *

Ballard: 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.

**** *

Ballard: 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.

Title Card: How Did SEEK Succeed?

Ballard: 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.

**** *

Ballard: 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?”

**** *

Ballard: 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.

**** *

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]

**** *

Ballard: 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.

**** *

Ballard: 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.

**** *

Ballard: [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.

**** *

Ballard: 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)
Courtesy of Linda Draper by Creative
Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 U.S. License

Works Cited:

Berger, Leslie. “The Pre-Baccalaureate Program at the College.” City College Alumnus. Dec. 1966. Archives and Special Collections, Buell Gallagher Files, “SEEK Program 1964-1969.” Morris Raphael Cohen Library, CCNY. TS.

Berger, Leslie. “Annual Report 1968-69 SEEK Program The City University of New York.” 21 Oct 1969. Archives and Special Collections, SEEK Box One. Morris Raphael Cohen Library, CCNY. TS.

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.

Levy, Bernard. “Informational Report by Professor Bernard Levy on the Pre- Baccalaureate Program.” 2 Dec. 1965. Archives and Special Collections, Buell Gallagher Files, “SEEK Program 1964-1969.” Morris Raphael Cohen

Library, CCNY. TS.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial- ShareAlike (CC BY-NC-SA)