

Cultivating College Success among Underprepared Students

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The Brooklyn College, City University of New York (CUNY), Search for Education Elevation and Knowledge (SEEK) Program, a higher education opportunity program, provides special assistance to students who are entering college for the first time. SEEK students are from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, and receive financial support as well as remedial and supplemental instruction, so that they will develop the skills needed to succeed in college. Success is measured by students' grade point averages, retention rates, and graduation rates. Elements of the SEEK model can be used by developmental educators in other academic support models and settings.

The transition from high school to college is not always easy, especially for students who are the first in their families to attend college (Benmayor, R., 2002; Choy, S. P., Horn, L.J., Nunez, A.M., & Chen, X., 2002; Terenzini, P., Springer, L., Yaeger, P., Pascarella, E., & Nora, A., 1996). In addition to being the first in their families to attend college, students coming from economically and academically disadvantaged backgrounds are less prepared than their classmates and at a higher risk of attrition during the first year (Massey, Charles, Lundy, & Fischer, 2003). Special college and university programs specifically designed to meet the needs of these at-risk students seek to provide academic and personal support throughout their undergraduate experiences. The purpose of this paper is to describe one such program, the Brooklyn College, City University of New York (CUNY), Search for Elevation Education and Knowledge (SEEK) Program, which uses a multidimensional approach to provide students from disadvantaged backgrounds instruction in the skills necessary for college persistence and degree attainment. Indications of students' success and practical application for faculty will also be discussed.

Program Overview

The SEEK Program employs a multidimensional approach, providing remedial and supplemental instruction coupled with academic support services. The program's goals are to help its 850 students pass courses and graduate at the same rate as first year students who were deemed college-ready. SEEK faculty and staff provide support services and institutional connections to promote the success of students who are from poor academic and economic backgrounds and who are entering college for the first time. Typically SEEK students are "the best students from the worst high schools" (Maloney, 2003, p. 688) where learning is passive and, oftentimes, simply "showing up" resulted in a passing grade. In the authors' experience, many students who become involved with SEEK come to college attempting to apply strategies to "get by" with minimum effort. In contrast, the program strives to help students become active learners who view education as an ongoing process.

Brooklyn College, CUNY, SEEK Services

At Brooklyn College, all SEEK students are required to attend a Pre-Freshman Summer Institute in which remedial and supplemental instruction is provided (e.g., study skills and small group study). During their first summer, students are enrolled in a Critical Inquiry class. This course, modeled after the college's rigorous core curriculum, is designed to prepare students for the kinds of reading and writing tasks they will face as undergraduate students. The course focuses on a central theme, such as "Freedom and Responsibility," and readings of varied genres are chosen annually to reflect the college's core curriculum. Classes are taught as workshops, with the instructors acting as facilitators. Students are instructed to read texts multiple times, noting structural shifts, lexical items, or any points of interest or confusion. Once a text is thoroughly annotated, students are asked to use their annotations to formulate thoughtful questions, either in small groups or individually. These questions serve as the springboards for class discussions, as well as written assignments. In "writing through their reading," students are "building competence as academic

citizens" (Maloney, 2003, p. 689).

The main goals of the Critical Inquiry class are to teach students to take control of their learning through active, meaningful reading and writing, including multiple readings of texts and multiple drafts of papers; to introduce them to student-centered learning as instructors allow students' questions to frame their classes; and, to enable students to use their experiences to form connections with texts (Maloney, 2003). Oftentimes, first year students are unaware of what is expected of them and are too intimidated to approach faculty. SEEK faculty provide clear explanations of the goals for their assignments, include rubrics, ask students to submit assignments in stages, encourage peer review, require revisions, and offer written feedback on preliminary drafts, all of which can help students develop better writing habits and increase confidence.

During the fall semester, faculty and staff in the SEEK Program strive to promote a sense of community by placing students in blocked courses. First year students are grouped in units and assigned the same academic counselor and, for the most part, the same schedule. The goals are that friendships will be fostered, peer support facilitated, and campus community networks formed to affirm that students "are not alone" in the degree attainment process (Astin, 1977; Chickering, 1969; Frances, Kelly & Bell, 1993; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1987; Tinto, 2004). The blocked programming consists of a structured schedule containing English Composition I, Counseling Workshop, mathematics, and a required course drawn from this urban college's mandated liberal arts curriculum. Skills, such as problem solving, critical thinking, and self-assessment are integrated into these courses.

Outside of the classroom, students receive additional individual support services such as advising, academic counseling, and tutoring. Students are required to attend a minimum of two tutoring sessions per week in mathematics and English, and can add tutoring in more subjects if they desire. Tutors are SEEK faculty and upperclassmen who have demonstrated scholastic ability. Peer tutors also serve as role models, classroom liaisons, and mentors for first-year students.

Indications of Brooklyn College, CUNY, SEEK Students' Success

Indications of SEEK students' success include performance data collected for the college's annual report. According to the CUNY Performance Management Report 2007-08, from the office of Institutional Research Assessment dated July 29, 2008, SEEK students' SAT scores are 30 to 40% lower than students' accepted through regular admission. Brooklyn College, CUNY, SEEK students' pass rate for the basic skills tests is 85.1% compared to the overall CUNY senior college rate of 84.6%. The one-year retention rate for SEEK students is 85% (2007, SEEK Annual Report), which is 5% higher than the college average. 66% of Brooklyn College, CUNY, SEEK students have a grade point average of 3.0 or above. On the CUNY Proficiency Exam, a university-wide test administered to all students before they are allowed to continue their studies as upperclassmen, the pass rate for SEEK students is 100% compared to the 93% pass rate for all other students. The graduation rate for SEEK students is 47% compared to 38% for all other students.

Practical Application of Brooklyn College, CUNY, SEEK Services

Elements from SEEK can be integrated into any developmental studies course or other first-year class. First, by becoming familiar with various campus resources (e.g., writing centers, math labs, tutoring, advising, personal counseling, disability services), faculty can direct students to the appropriate services. Second, by providing clear goals for assignments, rubrics, opportunities for peer review, and revisions, faculty will not only aid students in the process of becoming competent in academic writing, instructors will also improve the quality of work submitted to them. Third, faculty can hold students to high standards, teach strategies that will improve academic performance, and invite students to participate in the intellectual life of the college (Maloney, 2003). Instructors can begin by instilling a sense of self-efficacy in their students, letting them know of other students who entered college labeled as underprepared and have gone on not only to graduate but to achieve honors. SEEK faculty have learned the importance of Maloney's challenge:

If at-risk college students are held to high standards, directly taught strategies for accomplishing good work within academic conventions, informed of the demands of the institution, and treated as colleagues in the shared adventure of learning, they can participate fully and successfully in the intellectual life of the college (2003, p. 664).

SEEK faculty and staff believe that there are benefits to both the timing and structure of this particular program. Starting with a summer institute "allows students to have a head start on college life" (Angel, first-year SEEK student, personal communication, March 22, 2010). Charlene, third-year SEEK student, said, "My summer program was exciting because I met cool professors, knew what was expected of me, learned time management and how to balance work, school, and family while maintaining a good GPA," (personal communication, March 22, 2010).

Value is also added through the blocked classes which provide continuity and integration of materials learned and promote deeper learning (Smith, M. K., 2003, 2009). Blocked courses are also associated with students' increased academic confidence, motivation, and personal responsibility for learning (Astin, 1977; Chickering, 1969; Tinto, 2004). Additionally, a sense of community is fostered, making it easier to create friendships. "As we get to know each other, we help each other understand class work," (Lucie, first-year SEEK student, personal communication, March 22, 2010). Moreover, "having the same teachers and same classmates and traveling together makes students comfortable. It also helped me develop confidence to speak in front of the class," (Ahli, first-year SEEK student, personal communication, March 22, 2010). Finally, by integrating support services such as tutoring into the course requirements and using SEEK faculty as tutors, students who might have been reluctant to seek out these services are more likely to integrate them into their norm of academic experience.

Conclusion

Through both the content and the structure of the Brooklyn College, CUNY, SEEK Program, numerous opportunities for high-quality interaction with faculty and peers in and out of the classroom

are provided to its underprepared students. As a result, program participants have found that they can succeed and achieve their academic goals (Amenkhienan & Kogan, 2004; Astin, 1993; Boylan, 2001; Tinto, 2004).

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