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Hunter Students SEEK Justice

Christopher Day

1995

The crowd of several hundred students stood silently, with their backs turned, as the provost of New York City's Hunter College, Laura F. Strumingher, tried to convince them that her plan to gut the SEEK program was in their interests. Unconvinced, a chant of "Hands off SEEK!" rose up from the students. Blanc began to storm off, restrained only by her advisers, who had a better understanding of what this protest meant. One by one, organizers of the protest took the microphone and spelled out the implications of the plan, as Blanc sputtered "You're being manipulated" to the students.

What was most exciting about the protest and the ensuing organizing activity is that it was all initiated by SEEK students themselves, and not by the student government bureaucrats who dominate the political life of Hunter. The main organizers were tutors, SEEK students who had succeeded in college and were now assisting other students. Only a handful of non-SEEK students came around for the organizing work.

Another exciting thing about this protest is how it has laid the groundwork for a mass, militant response to the latest round of cuts in financial aid, class closings, teacher layoffs, and tuition increases under the budget proposed by New York governor George

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Pataki. Previous budget cuts and tuition increases have resulted in city-wide student strikes. In 1989 these strikes defeated a proposed tuition increase. In 1991 the strike movement did not succeed (see "Student Strike Rocks New York," *Love and Rage* Vol. 2 No. 5, May 1991).

The SEEK program is the main mechanism used by the City University of New York (CUNY), of which Hunter College is a part, to guarantee open admission to New York City high school graduates who do not meet the ordinary entrance requirements. SEEK provides special remedial and developmental courses through an independent Department of Academic Skills, which allows SEEK students to receive financial aid without taking a full credit load. SEEK also guarantees financial aid for five years, provides tutoring, and generally assists students in surviving in an often hostile environment. The vast majority of SEEK students are students of color, often the first members of their families to go to college.

The plan to gut SEEK is the result of a demand by CUNY that each college "restructure" its SEEK program. Most CUNY schools have already done so, but the director of the SEEK program at Hunter refused to go along with these demands; he was replaced by a more compliant director, who promptly produced the demanded "restructuring proposal." The essence of the proposal was to transfer all the faculty out of the Department of Academic Skills into the English and Math Departments, and to force SEEK students to take regular remedial courses. A regular remedial course load does not qualify a student for financial aid, so SEEK students would be effectively forced to take non-remedial courses, which they are not prepared for, at the same time as their remedial courses. The proposal is a one-two punch to the SEEK program that would make its elimination during future budget cuts a virtual certainty. The proposal simultaneously sets SEEK students up for failure and breaks up the institutional weight of the SEEK faculty, also largely people of color, by forcing them into overwhelmingly white departments.

The college administration has attempted to sell the plan as one motivated by a desire to "desegregate" the two distinct remedial programs and to diversify the English and Math Departments. But the plan was developed in consultation with the English and Math faculty behind the backs of the SEEK faculty. The administration argues that the separate SEEK courses attach a stigma to the students who take them, and that this (not the crappy educations they got in high school) accounts for their high attrition rate. But the SEEK students themselves are fiercely loyal to the program because they know that, for all of its deficiencies, it is their best chance to escape lives of grinding poverty.

The proposal was sprung on the SEEK students just two weeks before the end of the fall semester, as students were preparing for finals. In spite of this, there was a flurry of organizing activity, including the protest and a later mass meeting in the middle of finals. It appears that much of the implementation took place during winter break, and it is unclear at this writing, in the first week of the spring semester, if there will be any more resistance.

The fight to defend SEEK at Hunter may be over. If so, it is an important preface to the coming battle against the budget cuts. In a few short weeks, SEEK students demonstrated their capacity to organize a defiant, democratic mass movement on campus. That experience will prove to be of great value in building the sort of movement it will take to defeat this next round of budget cuts in NY and everywhere else.