



ISSUE BRIEF

SEEK-ing a Better Future

Supporting College Success for Economically and
Educationally Disadvantaged Students

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A four-year college degree continues to be the most reliable path to long-term economic security.¹ As the price of college has increased, financial aid opportunities have expanded to ensure that college remains accessible regardless of family income. Yet college completion rates among first-generation college students and students who graduate from low-income high schools or from low-income households still trail behind those of their economically advantaged peers, confirming that financial support alone is not enough to ensure low-income and first-generation college students with non-financial barriers to completion.² Research suggests that financial aid is a more effective force for college completion when bundled with non-financial student support services.³

¹ Liang Zhang, Xiangmin Liu, and Yitong Hu, “Degrees of Return: Estimating Internal Rates of Return for College Majors Using Quantile Regression,” *American Educational Research Journal* 61, no. 3 (March 2024): 577-609, <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312241231512>.

² Ibid.

³ Richard Fry, “First-Generation College Graduates Lag Behind Their Peers on Key Economic Outcomes,” *The Pew Research Center*, May 18 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2021/05/18/first-generation-college-graduates-lag-behind-their-peers-on-key-economic-outcomes>; Margaret Cahalan, Nicole Brunt, Terry Vaughan III, Erick Montenegro, Stephanie Breen, Esosa Ruffin, and Laura Perna, “Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States 2024: 50-Year Historical Trend Report,” *The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, Council for Opportunity in Education (COE) and Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy of the University of Pennsylvania (Penn AHEAD)*, 2024, https://www.pellinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/PELL_2024_Indicators-Report_f.pdf; Lindsay C. Page, Stacy S. Kehoe, Benjamin L. Castleman, and Gumilang Aryo Sahadewo, “More than Dollars for Scholars: The Impact of the Dell Scholars Program on College Access, Persistence, and Degree Attainment,” *Journal of Human Resources* 54, no. 3 (July 2019): 683-725, <https://doi.org/10.3368/jhr.54.3.0516.7935R1>; Rodney J. Andrews, Scott A. Imberman, Michael F. Lovenheim, “Recruiting and Supporting Low-Income, High-Achieving Students at Flagship Universities,” *Economics of Education Review* 74 (February 2020): 101923, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2019.101923>; Charles T. Clotfelter, Steven W. Hemelt, and Helen F. Ladd, “Multifaceted Aid for Low-income Students and College Outcomes: Evidence from North Carolina,” *Economic Inquiry* 56, no. 1 (August 2017): 278–303, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ecin.12486>; Michael Weiss, Alyssa Ratledge, Colleen Sommo, and Himani Gupta, “Supporting Community College Students from Start to Degree Completion: Long-Term Evidence from a Randomized Trial of CUNY’s ASAP,” *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 11, no. 3 (July 2019): 253–297, <https://doi.org/10.1257/app.20170430>.

In this study, we evaluate the effect of a long-running program that combines financial support with academic advising, career counseling, and tutoring services to promote college completion: the Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge program, or SEEK. Established at CUNY in 1965, SEEK is a legislatively mandated opportunity program offered at each of CUNY's senior colleges. SEEK accepts first-year students who would not have been—or who were not—accepted as an incoming freshman at their senior college based on their high school grade point average and/or SAT scores. SEEK provides tutoring, academic and career counseling, and a community of peers. What distinguishes SEEK from the other higher education support programs is that SEEK accepts students with substantially weaker academic preparation than students accepted as part of the regular freshman cohort.

We examine nine cohorts of SEEK students at 11 of CUNY's bachelor's degree-granting colleges between 2007 and 2018 (N=11,976) and compare them to all non-SEEK full-time first-time freshmen and Pell Grant recipients at those campuses over the same period (N=52,106). Importantly, SEEK students in our study have average SAT and high school grade point averages (HSGPA) that are almost a full standard deviation lower than their Pell-recipient counterparts. We examine multiple measures of academic success, including credit accumulation, persistence, and graduation adjusted for high school GPA, SAT scores, and a detailed set of fixed effects related to the campus attended, cohort year, race/ethnicity, gender, most desired campus, and county of residence. Results indicate that SEEK students are 3.8 percentage points more likely to be retained after one year (mean, 87 percent), earn 0.23 more credits in the first year (mean, 26.8 credits) and are 4.7 percentage points more likely to graduate in six-years (mean, 63 percent) than their non-SEEK comparison group.

A concern in any observational evaluation is that hard-to-measure characteristics of the participants who choose to enroll in the program and not the services provided by the program account for the positive results. We undertake a number of statistical “stress tests” and the results are the same. For instance, overwhelmingly, the most important predictor of enrollment in SEEK and academic success is a student's HSGPA. Thus, we contrast SEEK students to their non-SEEK counterparts within each point of HSGPA. We compare, for example, a SEEK student with a HSPGA of 85 (on a scale of 50 to 100) to a non-SEEK student with the same HSGPA adjusted for SAT scores and the panoply of fixed effects listed above. We

repeat this exercise for every point of HSGPA from 70 to 90. The average of the 21 coefficients on SEEK are almost identical to the pooled results. Second, we compare the effect of SEEK to the effect of a similar CUNY program that enrolls regular freshmen at the same campus over the same time period but was evaluated by a randomized design. The effect of both programs on five-year graduation rates is substantial and statistically significant relative to the same comparison group.⁴ Finally, we apply recent statistical tests for confounding.⁵ They show that an unobserved confounder would have to have more explanatory power for both SEEK enrollment and academic outcomes than HSGPA to overturn our results. We can never eliminate the possibility of confounding, but given the explanatory power of HSGPA, we conclude the likelihood of substantial confounding in this context is small.

Results from this study add to the growing literature that financial aid bundled with academic and supportive services can greatly improve outcomes among disadvantaged students. What stands out from the SEEK program is that even if students enter with substantial academic disadvantages, counseling, tutoring, and a supportive community of peers can improve academic outcomes substantively.

⁴ Diana Stumbos, Zineta Kolenovic, Himani Gupta, “Accelerate, Complete, Engage (ACE): Outcomes for Three First-Time Freshman Cohorts. City University of New York,” *CUNY Accelerated Study in Associate Programs and Accelerate, Complete, Engage*, August 2022, https://www1.cuny.edu/sites/asap/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2022/09/CUNY_ACE_Research_Brief_August-22_Web-Final.pdf; Michael Scuello and Diana Strumbos, “Evaluation of Accelerate, Complete, Engage (ACE) at CUNY John Jay College of Criminal Justice,” *CUNY Accelerated Study in Associate Programs; Accelerate, Complete, Engage; metis associates*, March 2024, https://www.cuny.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/page-assets/about/administration/offices/student-success-initiatives/asap/about/ace/300414_CUNY_March_2024_ACE_Final_Report_m1-1.pdf.

⁵ Peng Ding, Tyler J. VanderWeele, “Sensitivity Analysis Without Assumptions,” *Epidemiology* 27, no. 3 (May 2018), <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26841057/>.