



# SEEK NEWS

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The Percy Ellis Sutton SEEK Program  
College of Staten Island / CUNY

## FROM THE DESK OF THE DIRECTOR

As we come to the end of another spring semester, my thoughts naturally turn to our SEEK graduates. This year 103 students earned degrees. Like many of their fellow CSI alumni, this fresh crop of graduates has worked long and hard to achieve their reward.

At the same time, I am thinking about the terms “persistence” and “retention” – two words that are mentioned a lot across higher education institutions these days. In fact, colleges and universities are increasingly



*Associate Provost Ralf Peetz with Ms. Garcia*

judged by how well they hold onto their students (“retention”) and whether or not their students keep working steadily toward the end (“persist”).

For baccalaureate degrees, four *unbroken* years of study is the common standard by which most students are expected to finish, and schools and outside evaluators use this four year benchmark as an accepted goal to work toward as well. In recent years, there has been growing concern that many students and institutions fall

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## NEWS FROM THE LEARNING CENTER

At SEEK, like so many other places on CSI’s campus, we rarely get to catch our breath at the end of a semester before the next one is upon us. As we progress through the summer, not only will SEEK counselors and Learning Center staff be meeting with each and every one of the 170 incoming new students, but we will also be busy gearing up for our **SEEK Summer Bridge Program**. All new SEEK students are required to attend a summer experience – either Summer Immersion or Summer Bridge, the

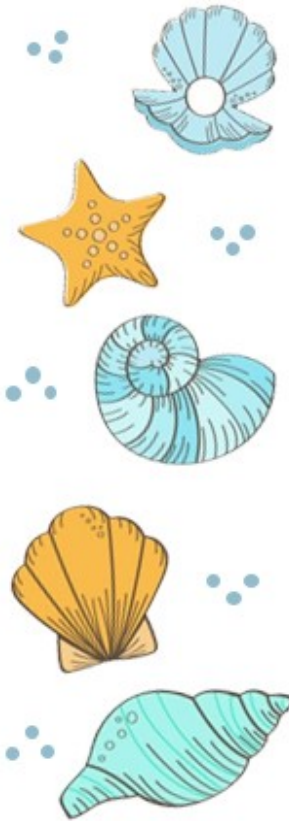
latter of which is designed for students who have passed or are exempt from all Basic Skills assessment tests. This year we expect to welcome up to seventy-five students for Bridge, a program consisting of both online and in-person components.

For much of the summer, my fellow staffers and I will be busy preparing the event’s activities: scheduling facilitators, students, and speakers; compiling materials; arranging lunches and other refreshments. I am also responsible for entering partici-

pants into the online Blackboard forum in anticipation of the online pieces of the program, as well as refreshing or creating workshops and assignments in the Bridge Blackboard library.

The event, which occurs in mid-August, consists of two days of ice breakers and workshops followed by online assignments that students are expected to complete before the first day of classes. Day one consists of three introductory group sessions on college life, college research and college

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## FROM THE DESK OF THE DIRECTOR (continued)

short of the goal, and that, despite many innovative student-centered programs and services, persistence and retention have not significantly increased.

However, some experts in the field of higher ed say that the four year standard is outdated, and doesn't reflect the reality of the modern college population – many of whom do not fit the stereotype of the traditional college student (that is, a recent high school graduate whose parents assume financial responsibility for college costs, and who is able to move through eight semesters relatively stress free and unwavering toward a clear goal). I wonder today how many CSI students fit this perfect picture.

If one talks to a SEEK or other CSI counselor, there will be tales of all kinds of social, psychological and financial problems that threatened to thwart our students' goals. They will tell you about students who come to school from homeless shelters, who still try to keep up with readings, exams and papers from there. There will be stories about sudden loss of income or personal medical crises or the stresses of chronically sick children, all major challenges to the college goal. Still more about coping with domestic violence, mental health issues or

hunger in the land of plenty. And more reports about students living under the threat and fear of family losses back in war-torn areas, or worrying about parents' deportation. Almost every student has a unique story to tell.

These are real life circumstances that aren't taken into account when talking about the typical college "coed." In spite of that, and with the help of the CUNY Office of Special Programs, we have taken many steps to try to accelerate our students' progress – from securing funding to pay for summer or winter courses, to providing travel monies in special circumstances or reducing our counselors' caseloads. Nevertheless, our SEEK grads rarely, if ever, fit the traditional pattern; many drop out and in, experience set-backs and typically take five or *more* years to complete a four year degree. For these grads, Commencement is all the sweeter, and our pride all the greater. I raise my hat to all the "non-traditional" students who walked across the Great Lawn on May 30<sup>th</sup>. I salute you all – each and every one.

— Gloria Garcia



## NEWS FROM THE LEARNING CENTER (continued)

writing, conducted by instructors from the SEEK Counseling/Learning Center staff, as well as the English Department. This year we hope to introduce a math session as well.

All of these topics are intended to assist students with their transition from high school. For example, the session on research introduces the CSI Library. Students learn how to find databases, and how to search for information efficiently; this is an interactive workshop in the SEEK Computer Lab, where students test out concepts and skills. Another workshop incorporates the

game "Jeopardy," exposing students to basic college writing and academic integrity in a fun and exciting way. Leadership skills and self-reflection are the focus of the concluding day of the Program, after which students are required to complete online activities such as a team building exercise, a workshop on College Student Success and an essay which they submit using Blackboard. I follow their progress and give feedback on Blackboard as they proceed.

While organizing such a comprehensive program is indeed time-consuming, it's a labor of love for me. During the summer, I make a point of trying to meet personally with every incoming Bridge student before the program starts. SEEK doesn't overlook the importance of these kinds of connections to the future success of our students. As a part-time member of the staff with the unofficial title of "Bridge Program Coordinator," I believe Bridge is an important event to promote early bonding of these students to the SEEK Program and the College. We look forward to it every summer.

— Nancy Goetze



## COUNSELING CORNER

New SEEK students are often surprised to learn that they are assigned a SEEK “counselor” and are expected to meet with that counselor at least once a month during their first year at CSI. Many new students have a distorted view of school counselors – thinking that counseling has to do with being “in trouble” or having “psychological problems.” They may think that counselors enforce rules, deal with disciplinary problems, report truants, etc. But counseling at SEEK (and CSI) is nothing like that at all. Instead, it’s all about helping students to succeed.

SEEK counselors help students cope with common difficulties and struggles that sometimes threaten to overwhelm. Such issues as academic challenges, relationship conflicts, family problems, illness or stress overload, and financial crises are all examples of the kinds of things that students bring to their SEEK counselors for help. Our role is to provide advice and support when students are dealing with these issues, or when they are thinking about important decisions, exploring career plans, building their resumes, and moving from semester to semester.

If you talk to many SEEK students, they’ll probably tell you how very valuable their counselor has been for them. Take,

for example, Wafaa Jaber, a sophomore medical technology major who lived many years in Jordan before returning here as an adult. “The counseling helps me to go forward and get past all the hard academic issues,” she says. “My counselor, Ms. Perez, keeps me on track.” Student Steven Stome Joseph agrees. “If it was not for the help of my SEEK counselor, I would probably be a statistic among black and Latino college dropouts. By the help of God who has blessed me with counselor Mr. James, I can proudly say that I am a man of integrity, a man of hope, a man of dream fulfillment, and most of all, a man of excellence.” Finally, staying in touch with a counselor may also help to avoid costly financial mistakes.

This is not to say that counseling is always sweetness and light. At times, counselors confront students about self-defeating thoughts or behaviors, push them to develop new habits, and encourage them to act in ways that will be more productive or successful. But our mission is always to listen and lend a helping hand. That’s why it’s so important for students to take advantage of this opportunity, and why we insist on meeting with students frequently, especially in their first year at SEEK.

— Maria Levine



## SEEK CELEBRATIONS!!!

The SEEK Program had plenty to celebrate this May on two occasions which recognized our student leaders, graduates and outstanding scholars. The first occurred on May 11<sup>th</sup> when the Division of Student Affairs and Office of Student Life sponsored the annual Student Leadership Summit Awards at Staten Island’s beautiful Vanderbilt at South Beach facility. Students from across the campus were there to party, and be recognized for their contributions to the college community. The following SEEK students took home awards: **Shashandrea Sappleton**, *Vanguard Award*; **Pharlande Sainte Juste**, *Summit Award*; **Safiya Vera**, *Visionary Award*; and **Damelsa Hatmil**, *Office of Student and Enrollment Services Blue and Gray award*.

The second celebration occurred just days later when SEEK

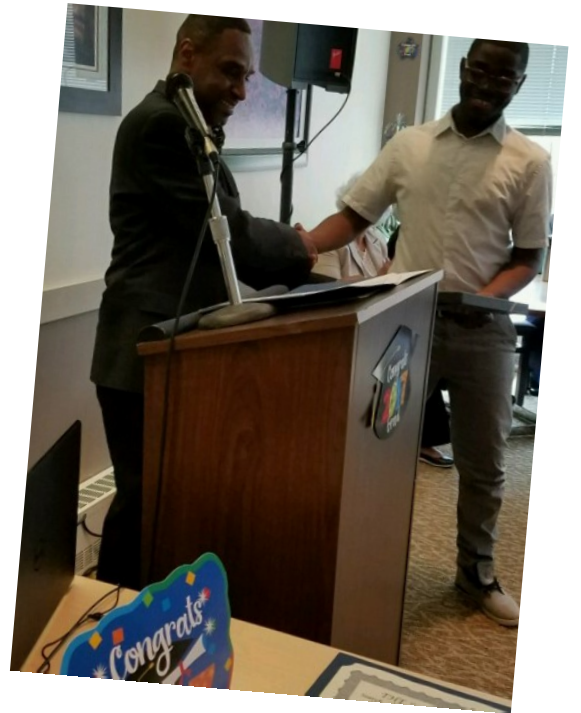
hosted a Student Honors Luncheon for our graduates and scholars in the CSI Park Café. PCA professor George Sanchez gave a very moving address acknowledging the great achievements of our grads, all of whom have overcome many obstacles on their path to success. Alumus **Clarissa Gattas**, now employed as an accountant, urged graduates to say “yes” to all the opportunities they will encounter. Ms. Frances Kingston brought greetings from Dr. Cheryl Williams, Dean of the CUNY Office of Special Programs. Finally, Associate Provost Ralf Peetz invited students to speak out about their experiences at CSI, especially as a members of the SEEK family. Lots of tears were shed, but there were also many laughs as students recalled their experiences. For photos from these two events, see “SEEK in Action,” pages 4 and 5.



# SEEK IN ACTION \* SEEK IN ACTION



Professor George Sanchez, guest speaker at the SEEK graduation celebration.



Mr. Steven James, MC for the SEEK graduation party, awarding Guenael Oristel a special certificate.



SEEK students attending a career workshop with Ms. Perez-Lai.

# SEEK IN ACTION \* SEEK IN ACTION



SEEK awardee, Damelsa Hatmil, being introduced by Vice President Jennifer Borrero at the Vanderbilt.



Alumnus Clarissa Gattas with CUNY staff member Frances Kingston at the SEEK Honors Luncheon.



Mary Cawog (Biology), one of our happy 2017 SEEK graduates.



# “HELLO” FROM SOME OF OUR SEEK LEARNING CENTER TUTORS



If you have problems with any of your Xs or need to learn how to speak Sine language, and want to strive for excellence, please do not be afraid to sit down with me for a tutoring session.

—Danielle



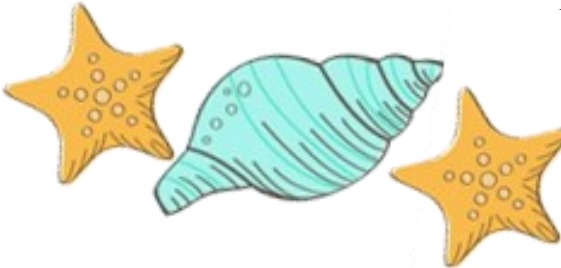
If you're SEEKing help in class, be it English, Math, Psychology, or Core, come to the Learning Center in 1A-108.

—Steven



I am an easy-going and friendly math tutor at SEEK. Feel free to speak to me if you have a problem; I'll be happy to assist!

—Rado



Google “Snapping turtle and pineapple.” (Enjoy, but remember to do your homework, and study.)

—Mimi

Beyond this door is a league of competent tutors eager to come to your aid!

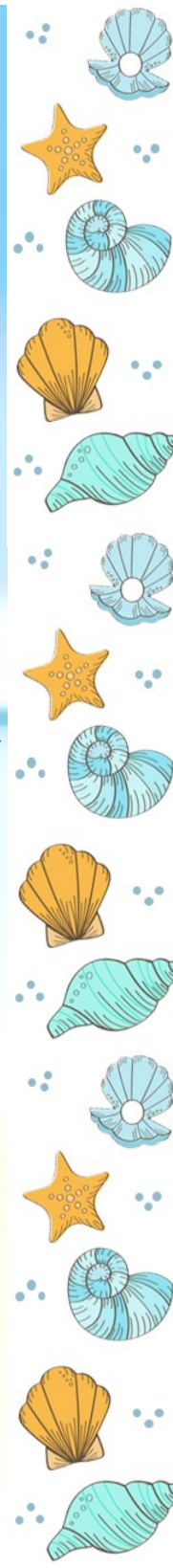
—Nadia



## NEWS TO KNOW



- After a year of serving as Interim Associate Provost for Undergraduate Studies, **Dr. Ralf Peetz** (Chemistry) recently accepted a permanent position in this role. He is responsible for overseeing many of CSI offices and programs, including SEEK. As Associate Provost, he will continue his focus on strengthening undergraduate studies and student success. We have enjoyed getting to know him over the past year, and going forward, are excited to be part of his vision for enhancing the student experience here at CSI.
- Third year nursing major, **Frank Scarcella**, has been doing his clinical experience at Staten Island University Hospital. He reports that he recently heard from CSI's Nursing Dept. Chair, Dr. Arlene Farren, that the hospital's nursing administration had received a message from a patient's family about the wonderful care Frank provided. The family also shared their praise by sending a copy of their message to CSI's President, William Fritz. Frank was commended for his knowledge and skill in caring for this patient. Dr. Farren expressed her pride, and SEEK joins with her in acknowledging Frank's seriousness and commitment to his future career. Congratulations, Frank!
- The **SEEK "Men of Excellence" Group**, under the leadership of counselor Steven James, recently concluded its fourth year of meetings, with eighteen students participating. Focusing especially on the needs and interests of Black and Latino males, the group is open to any SEEK student in the Program. During this past semester, members met monthly, addressing such topics as money management, networking and dating etiquette. In earlier semesters, the group has hosted prominent CSI faculty, including Dr. Calvin Holder and Dr. Francisco Soto, and has invited other members of the staff to participate as well. This semester, special recognition was given to two graduating seniors – **Guenael Oristel** who completed the baccalaureate in education and **Winston Farrell** who earned a BS in Business.
- On another note, counselor Jennifer Carrion has organized a **SEEK "Women's Group"** which has experienced growing attention as well. Stay tuned for more news about this initiative in a future issue of "SEEK News."
- **The March 13 CUNY Borough Hearing** brought CUNY administrators to CSI for their annual visit, and, as usual, SEEK students made us proud. **Pharlande Saint Juste**, **Safiya Vera** and **Kenny Larregui** testified at the hearing about their experiences at CSI, but especially about their thoughts and feelings on being a part of the SEEK Program. Their eloquent comments truly made the Program shine. Thanks to all three for volunteering and displaying such school spirit!
- **AND FINALLY. . .where are they now?** As we've said before, we love hearing from some of our SEEK alumni. Lately we've been in touch with two of our 2016 grads – **Emmanuela (Emma) Petit-Frere** and **Summer Lightfoot**. Last fall, Emma, who was a psychology major here at CSI, went off to the Graduate Mental Health Counseling Program at New York University. She reports that she still misses SEEK every day, especially the one-to-one contacts with her SEEK counselor and mentor, Mr. Steven James, who was always there to "... support me and provide advice." At NYU, she's taken many courses already, and has discovered that "...counseling itself is another language." And Summer, who was an International Studies major at CSI, reached out to us after her first graduate school semester. She is enrolled at the New School where she is studying International Affairs with a concentration in Conflict and Security. Said Summer, "I really enjoy the program and the school; it's a very welcoming environment, and my classes are small and interesting." It's great to hear that our SEEK grads are off doing things they love.



## SPOTLIGHT ON STEFANIE GARDINER

*As any SEEK student will tell you, one of the most important persons in our Program is Ms. Stefanie Gardiner who actually isn't an "official" member of the SEEK staff at all. However, as an employee of CSI's Office of Financial Aid, she serves as SEEK's financial aid liaison, a critical contributor to the success of our Program. Stefanie is a crucial part of SEEK's recruitment team, patiently walking new (and continuing) students through the sometimes mysterious, frequently arduous SEEK Financial Aid certification process. She is a steadfast supporter of SEEK, and we thought our readers should have a chance to get to know her a little better.*



dents, she says "It's really important that they stay well informed and take responsibility for what is required of them, like paying attention to deadlines. Students should be checking their CUNYfirst accounts and checking their emails. And they should always ask questions if they don't understand something."

As in so many other CSI offices, summer is one of the busiest times in the Office of Financial Aid. Still, Stefanie finds time to enjoy her non-work pursuits, such as "...going to the beach, biking, hiking and traveling." Among other places, she has traveled the world from France to Israel, toured cross-country in the US, and visited the Caribbean -- most recently, with her family, to the Turks and Caicos.

While she has worked at CSI for almost twenty years, Stefanie has been in her current financial aid position of "SEEK Coordinator" for nine. Many might be surprised to learn that, prior to coming to work at CSI, she pursued a career in TV production, and worked for The Montel Williams and Geraldo Rivera shows before leaving that field to start a family. At CSI, she was first introduced to our Program while serving in an internship position at SEEK when pursuing her Master's.

Besides screening all new SEEK applicants for financial eligibility (a very labor-intensive task), Stefanie also helps all students with various financial issues, processes FAFSA applications and holds workshops about financial aid, both on and off campus. Asked what message she'd like to convey to stu-

Stefanie's love for SEEK and CSI is evidenced in her willingness to give up some of her evenings and weekends to help recruit new students. Over time, she gets to know many of these SEEK freshmen as they progress toward their degrees. "I love seeing our students overcome challenges," she says. "Besides their financial ones, many of our students open up to me about other struggles as well. Seeing those students win awards, hold leadership positions, study abroad, give back to their community and do so many other wonderful things, is truly inspiring -- and makes what I do so worthwhile!" With sentiments like those, it's easy to see why Stefanie Gardiner is a most treasured member of the SEEK "family."



## THE PERCY ELLIS SUTTON SEEK PROGRAM



[www.csi.cuny.edu/seek](http://www.csi.cuny.edu/seek)



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