

The Bard Early College Network

An OSUN Digital Case Study

Executive Summary

How can academic institutions expand educational opportunities beyond elite social classes? Can earlier access to higher education help decrease the gap in educational outcomes between privileged and marginalized groups? This Open Society University Network (OSUN) audiovisual case study explores these issues as part of a series of cases on Bard College and OSUN civic engagement projects.

This case explores these questions by examining the Bard High School Early College (BHSEC) program, a civic engagement project that allows high school students to enroll in Bard College to begin earning their college degrees during their last two years of high school. This case focuses especially on Bard High School Early College Newark, and includes interviews with Bard’s Vice-President for Student Affairs and Dean of the Bard Early Colleges Dumaine Williams, Executive Director of BHSEC for Bard Stephen Tremaine, Principal of BHSEC Newark Dr. Carla Stephens, BHSEC educators Dr. Tiffany Morris and Dr. Celeste Woo, and BHSEC Newark students Marley Johnson, J’kwon Addles, and Alice Doran.

The case includes the following elements:

§ [Video Interviews](#)

§ Written Case Study: This Document

Bard and the Liberal Arts Mission

Founded in 1860 in New York’s Hudson Valley, Bard College was firmly established in the liberal arts tradition. This tradition can trace its roots back to the philosophical schools of ancient Athens which came from a “desire for a universal understanding.”¹ This educational philosophy holds that it is only

¹ Nigel Tubbs, *Philosophy and Modern Liberal Arts Education : Freedom Is to Learn*. (Basingstoke, Hampshire : Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

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through gaining true knowledge of the world that one can become truly free. Thus, the art of learning liberates.

Bard uses this educational philosophy to guide its pedagogy. Every student enrolled at Bard must learn critical communication skills, and a strong emphasis is put on writing regardless of the student's major. In the month before their freshman year, every student enrolled at Bard must complete the *Language and Thinking Program*, a writing-focused three-week intensive introduction to the liberal arts that "aims to cultivate habits of thoughtful reading and discussion, clear articulation, accurate self-critique, and productive collaboration."² In the words of BHSEC New Orleans advisor Kaycee Filson: "It's the liberal arts belief that if you are going to be a good doctor, you also need to be a good writer, a good philosopher, a good historian, a good communicator."³

Outreach Through Education: Bard's Trustee Leader Scholar Program

Bard does not just see a broad and varied education as a means to personal liberation, though; according to Jonathan Becker, Executive Vice-president of Bard's Open Society University Network (OSUN), a large part of Bard's mission as an institution is using education as a means to "promote citizenship" within a broader community. This approach, known as "students as citizens" emphasizes the obligation Bard takes on in a bid to give back to their broader communities.⁴ Often, giving back takes the form of expanding educational opportunities for communities that may not have otherwise had access to them. This is the driving force behind the college's civic engagement projects, undertaken through the Trustee Leader Scholar (TLS) Program. Two such projects showcase the combined efforts of students and faculty of Bard to expand access to education. The Bard Prison Initiative, which brings Bard college to incarcerated inmates across New York State and Brothers at Bard, a peer mentorship program that encourages young men of color to attend college and supports them once they are there.⁵

By bringing education to underserved and underrepresented communities, Bard's network of educational advocates seek to improve the strength of their communities and democracy as a whole. Paul Marienthal, founder of the TLS program, summarizes the importance of education for democracy: "Everybody deserves education. We don't have to justify it further than that... It's almost like a deep principle of democracy. Everybody deserves to be engaged with."⁶

² "First-Year Students at Bard College," *Bard College*, accessed on July 25, 2023, <https://www.bard.edu/firstyear/>.

³ Bard Early College Promotional Video, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1UT5Fny-ArYdcITm_64g9Lz4F5gOjG2Gs/view.

⁴ Jonathan Becker in discussion with Seamus Heady.

⁵ Read more about The Bard Prison Initiative and Brothers at Bard in the OSUN Digital Case collection.

⁶ Paul Marienthal in discussion with Seamus Heady.

The TLS Program began with, and continues to serve a broader purpose. When Marienthal was tasked with creating the program in 1997, its only function was supposed to be improving the overall health of the student population. This initial conception of TLS, which brought 12 student athletes under Marienthal's (then a part-time squash coach for Bard) wing, was less than successful. Almost immediately, two-thirds of the students dropped out of the project.⁷ The future of TLS did not look bright.

That changed when TLS took on the Bard Prison Initiative, a project that looked beyond Bard's walls and sought to bring the same elite liberal arts and science education to the incarcerated population of the state of New York. With the program's scope widened, TLS became the incubator for any student-led initiatives which sought to enhance civic engagement.

As long as students could show that they had a clear vision that will help a member of their community who wants it, the TLS program promised to help them make this vision a reality. It is not easy, though. The student leaders are responsible for all of their own fundraising and must be able to roll with the punches as hurdles arise. Despite these difficulties, the TLS program has only grown. Today, TLS sponsors 30-35 projects led by over 50 student leaders yearly, each addressing a distinct problem recognized by them.

Though BHSEC does not operate under the TLS program, two of the current leaders of BHSEC, Executive Director of BHSEC Stephen Tremaine and Vice-President and Dean of the Early Colleges Dumaine Williams, were Trustee Leader Scholars during their time at Bard. Both of their involvements in TLS related to their later work in BHSEC, though. Tremaine focused on disaster recovery initiatives in Louisiana as an undergraduate in the TLS program and would later go on to help found BHSEC New Orleans and Williams gained experience working in education by leading a TLS project focused on education abroad.

Foundational Education: Primary and Secondary Schools

Funding Inequities and the Public School Problem

In order to understand why BHSEC was necessary to implement as an institutional initiative, it is first important to understand the United States' public education system more broadly. In the US, public schools are funded by a combination of state, municipal, and federal taxes. When combined, this totals nearly \$600 billion spent yearly or over \$14,000 per pupil. While this may seem like a hefty sum, the growth of educational spending actually lags behind total spending by \$1.5 billion annually. In addition, the US falls behind other developed nations in per pupil spending and percent of GDP spent on education, which is about 3% on average.⁸

⁷ Paul Marienthal in discussion with Seamus Heady.

⁸ Melanie Hanson, "US Public Education Spending Statistics," *Education Data Initiative*, June 15, 2022, <https://educationdata.org/public-education-spending-statistics>.

While these national figures tell a story about how education is viewed broadly in the US, the vast majority of public school budgets are financed by state and local property taxes. This means that there is not only a large disparity between wealthier states and poorer states in terms of how much is spent per pupil, but there is also a huge difference in educational funding from school district to school district within each state. The result is a system in which school districts in the wealthiest areas of a state have significantly more money to spend on education than poorer areas. This divide between wealthy and poor school districts often also falls along racial lines, with students of color disproportionately present in underfunded urban public schools.⁹ Because quality education is a means to social and economic mobility, the students who need this resource the most are often the ones left behind as a result of lack of funding for education.

Take New Jersey, for example. According to the Education Law Center:

New Jersey has among the most intensely economically and racially segregated public school districts in the nation. The concentration of poverty in certain school districts – mostly urban, rural and their environs – generates additional educational needs. Many urban districts have student poverty rates over 80%, while the wealthiest districts in the suburbs have an average poverty rate of 4%.¹⁰

The result of these inequalities is a vicious cycle in which wealthy schools have more money to finance quality education, which improves economic and social mobility, keeping wealth in already wealthy school districts. The inverse is true as well. Without access to a quality education, there is often no clear avenue for poor students to leave—or better yet, improve—these low-income, underfunded areas.

Another Choice: Charter Schools

In response to this, New Jersey and many states subsidize school districts with a weaker tax base compared to wealthier districts. This is not the only manner in which funding gaps can be closed, though. Charter schools have been another approach to broadening educational opportunities since first being established in the United States in 1991. Charter schools are publicly funded, but not by the property taxes of one school district alone. Instead, they are given a contract, or a charter, by the state which provides funding to operate a school through funds taken in the form of taxes across the state as a whole. Usually, students enroll at charter schools via a lottery system that allows students from outside the

⁹ Cory Turner, Reema Khrais, Tim Lloyd, Alexandra Olgin, Laura Isensee, Becky Vevea, and Dan CarsenPR, “Why America’s Schools Have a Funding Problem,” *NPR*, April 18, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/2016/04/18/474256366/why-america's-schools-have-a-money-problem>.

¹⁰ “The Right Way to Compare NJ Education Funding,” *Education Law Center*, March 29, 2010, <https://edlawcenter.org/news/archives/school-funding/the-right-way-to-compare-nj-education-funding.html>.

school's immediate geographic vicinity to attend regardless of region or ability to pay.¹¹ While this is not unique to charter schools as some other schools, including BHSEC, also allow students from outside specific neighborhoods to attend, it does set charter schools apart from traditional public schools.

Evidence for the efficacy of charter schools is extremely mixed, and it remains unclear whether they actually improve overall educational outcomes. While there is some evidence to suggest charter schools improve educational outcomes for the students enrolled in them, especially students of color, charter school opponents argue that they divert resources away from traditional public schools and leave behind "problem students" who need greater attention in their schools as is.¹² While charter schools provide more flexibility when compared to traditional public schools, they are far from a solution to all of the problems in the public education system. In order to expand educational access to as many people as possible, traditional public schools and charter schools are not sufficient on their own. For this reason, early colleges such as BHSEC can focus on these same, ongoing problems.

Bard High School Early College

Early College History: Simon's Rock

The beginning of the early college project in the United States did not begin at Bard. The first early college in the United States, Simon's Rock, was founded in 1966 in Massachusetts by Elizabeth Blodgett Hall.¹³ A former private school headmistress, Hall knew that many high school students are ready for college-level work. For these students, traditional high schools were inadequate to serve their academic potential. Yet Hall recognized the importance of a basal high school education for every student as well. With these two ideas in mind, she created Simon's Rock. At this school, students spent their first two years doing high school-level work and their second two years, what would traditionally have been their junior and senior years of high school, beginning their collegiate studies. Students would graduate from Simon's Rock with both a high school diploma and an associate degree, a core component of the BHSEC program even today.

Simon's Rock evolved rapidly following its inception. At first, an all-female institution, Simon's Rock admitted its first co-ed class in 1970. After a series of administrative changes and funding struggles, the school became interested in becoming part of an established college in the nearby area. Bard, with its commitment to expanding liberal arts education, was the perfect match. In 1979, Simon's Rock officially became an affiliate of Bard College.¹⁴

¹¹ Libby Nelson, "Everything You Need to Know About Charter Schools: What is a Charter School?," *Vox*, April 30, 2014, <https://www.vox.com/2014/4/30/18076968/charter-schools>.

¹² Libby Nelson, "Everything You Need to Know About Charter Schools: What is a Charter School?," *Vox*, April 30, 2014, <https://www.vox.com/2014/4/30/18076968/charter-schools>.

¹³ "The Nation's First Early College Turns 50," *Bard College at Simon's Rock*, accessed on July 25, 2023, <https://simon-s-rock.edu/news/first-early-college-turns-50.php>.

¹⁴ "Our History," *Bard Early College*, accessed July 25, 2023, <https://bhsec.bard.edu/our-history/>.

Simon's Rock remained the sole early college institution at Bard for another two decades until, in 2001, Bard unveiled the Bard High School Early College program.

From Simon's Rock to Beyond: Early College Expands

Bard College association with Simon's Rock proved successful in providing the innovative and cross-disciplinary education Bard prides itself on. For this reason, the decision was made to bring this program to more students who could benefit from a head start in their path to higher education. In partnership with the New York City Department of Education, the BHSEC program was born and began to plan a new school to serve NYC students.¹⁵

New York City was the perfect place to begin the first chapter of the new BHSEC program for many reasons. First and foremost, placing the program in a large urban center allows it to reach the greatest number of students who could potentially benefit from the school. NYC is not only the largest and most populous city in the US, it is also in Bard's backyard.

Size and proximity were not the only considerations though. NYC also contains a breadth of economically, ethnically, and culturally diverse students. From the beginning, BHSEC was meant to expand access to educational opportunities for every student, regardless of affluence or connections. Without attention to whom BHSEC was made available, the program could easily exacerbate pre-existing educational disparities. By placing its first campus in NYC, Bard consciously chose to connect with traditionally underserved communities to help close these gaps.

BHSEC in Practice: Manhattan

In 2001, BHSEC opened its first campus in Brooklyn, later moving to Manhattan in 2002.¹⁶ BHSEC Manhattan is officially a public school, in which students can enroll in via a lottery system. Students enrolled in a BHSEC program graduate with a high school diploma and an associates degree, as well as with up to 60 college credits that can be transferred to other post-secondary institutions. Students achieve this by spending their first two years— what are traditionally called freshman and sophomore year— completing their baseline high school credits. Their third and fourth years— traditionally junior and senior year— are spent taking college-level courses for college credit.

Because of the intense demand for such a program, BHSEC has a rigorous pre-admission process. While the institution must ensure that it enrolls students who will find success taking intense college courses as 16, 17, and 18-year-olds, the primary purpose of this process is not to gauge how well a student has performed academically in the past, but rather to determine their future potential. For this reason, BHSEC

¹⁵ "Our History," *Bard Early College*, accessed July 25, 2023, <https://bhsec.bard.edu/our-history/>.

¹⁶ "Welcome to Bard High School Early College Manhattan," *Bard High School Early College Manhattan*, accessed on July 25, 2023, <https://bhsec.bard.edu/manhattan/>.

selects students based on interviews and essays, not standardized test scores, which are historically discriminatory. In the words of Stephen Tremaine, Vice President for the Early Colleges: “Intellectual motivation, intellectual curiosity. That’s what we look for.”¹⁷

These two factors, along with a strong interest in Bard Early College over other traditional high schools, is all that is needed to determine admission. As a result, nearly half of the students who apply to BHSEC are deemed “admissible,” opening the door for disadvantaged students to access the same opportunities their wealthier peers have had access to.¹⁸ Approximately two-thirds of the students currently enrolled in BHSEC are first generation college students, and approximately three-quarters are eligible for Pell Grant financial aid. This is only possible with a unique enrollment system. According to Professor Tiffany Morris, the result is a school full of passionate students.

One thing about our school is that we do get students that are eager to learn... we don’t only recruit and let in the top-notch students, so some of them have not had the experience of a strong education. Some are coming from charter schools or stronger schools; not all of them do. So some of them are behind a little bit. And for me, one of the most exciting things about this job is watching people who are behind catch and sometimes even pass some of the others because they’re so hungry for knowledge. And it’s really exciting to see that a student who could barely write or barely solve a problem, all of a sudden, they’re winning contests and they’re getting published.¹⁹

Due to the massive popularity of the program, and in pursuit of the goal of increasing educational accessibility to all those who want it, BHSEC opened up a second NYC campus in Queens in 2008.²⁰ Even with this second location, far more students express interest in the Bard Early College program than can actually attend. Of the 7,000 applicants to the two BHSEC NYC campuses, the schools only have the capacity to admit 300 students total.²¹ This incredible popularity prompted BHSEC to expand its scope to not only New York but to other urban centers with underserved communities.

BHSEC Expands: New Orleans

Following the success of both its New York City campuses, BHSEC sought to expand to other underserved communities. One such community in clear need of education reform was New Orleans. New Orleans is a racially, culturally, and economically diverse city, but the effects of past legal segregation, especially in education, are still visible today.

¹⁷ Stephen Tremaine in discussion with Marino Bubba.

¹⁸ Stephen Tremaine in discussion with Seamus Heady.

¹⁹ Tiffany Morris in discussion with Seamus Heady.

²⁰ “Our History,” *Bard Early College*, accessed July 25, 2023, <https://bhsec.bard.edu/our-history/>.

²¹ Stephen Tremaine in discussion with Marino Bubba.

The city of New Orleans intentionally segregated the city by race using the public school system beginning with the first Black public high school in New Orleans, McDonogh 35 in 1917. The city's school board designated the Rampart Street corridor as the location for the school, with the intention of driving away white residents and semi-officially creating a primarily Black area.²² City officials continued this practice of using Black schools as a means to segregate the city by neighborhood officially until the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court Case made desegregation the law of the land. Even still, segregation continued in practice as poor Black residents remained situated in poor, historically segregated neighborhoods. These neighborhoods were also placed in geographically unsuitable areas.²³ This proved disastrous for people of color in New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina ravaged the city in 2005.

Hurricane Katrina may have been a natural disaster, but the damage it created was a result of human policies. Massive flooding, exposure due to property loss, and rampant disease killed more than a thousand people, most of them people of color, and left millions more homeless in the city.²⁴ The disparate racial impacts of the disaster were not only a result of governmental negligence following the disaster, but also the long history of forcing Black residents into inhospitable areas below sea-level, often using public schools, despite these areas being well-known flood risks.

Hurricane Katrina also destroyed huge portions of New Orleans' infrastructure, including school facilities. The state of Louisiana, which took over control of the New Orleans school system just before Hurricane Katrina, decided to not only rebuild its public school buildings but redesign the entire system to include a charter school system in an effort to integrate poor students of color from marginalized communities into *de facto* segregated schools. In place of geographically centered, neighborhood reliant schools, a city-wide lottery was instituted to create greater school choice regardless of one's neighborhood of residence.²⁵

While there is still much debate regarding the efficacy of this school-choice revolution, New Orleans was undoubtedly a fertile ground for creating another BHSEC campus. Bard College and TLS program alumni Stephen Tremaine recognized this opportunity. As a New Orleans native, Tremaine knew the positive impact BHSEC could have on his community. As Bard's Executive Director for BHSEC, took the lead in establishing this new campus in 2011.²⁶

Continued Expansion: Newark

²² Sarah Carr, "How New Orleans Leaders Built a Segregated City," *The Hechinger Report*, March 14, 2019, <https://hechingerreport.org/how-new-orleans-leaders-built-a-segregated-city/>.

²³ Sarah Carr, "How New Orleans Leaders Built a Segregated City," *The Hechinger Report*, March 14, 2019, <https://hechingerreport.org/how-new-orleans-leaders-built-a-segregated-city/>.

²⁴ Poppy Markwell and Raoult Ratard, "Deaths Directly Caused by Hurricane Katrina," *Louisiana Department of Health*, accessed on July 25, 2023, https://ldh.la.gov/assets/oph/Center-PHCH/Center-CH/stepi/specialstudies/2014PopwellRatard_KatrinaDeath_PostedOnline.pdf.

²⁵ "The Re-Education of New Orleans," *EducationWeek*, accessed on July 25, 2023, <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/the-re-education-of-new-orleans>.

²⁶ "Our History," *Bard Early College*, accessed July 25, 2023, <https://bhsec.bard.edu/our-history/>.

As Tremaine began leading BHSEC's creation in New Orleans, BHSEC administrators looked to other cities that would benefit from the increased educational opportunities of an early college. They turned their attention to a city closer to home: Newark, New Jersey. Newark seemed like another prime candidate to benefit from the BHSEC program. It is a majority black city, but many of the schools within it lack substantial levels of racial integration.²⁷ In addition, more than a quarter of its residents live below the poverty line.²⁸ As in the case of New Orleans, these contemporary features can trace their causes back to history.

Newark has a long history of racism and racial tensions. Following World War II, the city began to experience one of the most intense instances of white flight in US history as millions of servicemen returned home from the war. White veterans used their government pensions to buy homes in the suburbs rather than returning to cities, but 1.2 million veterans of color were denied access to these pensions.²⁹ For Newark, white flight was exacerbated by manufacturing and other critical industries leaving the city, causing unemployment to skyrocket.³⁰ Wealthier white residents followed jobs elsewhere or moved to the suburbs with their greater access to the new and growing US highway system, but residents of color did not have the means to follow.

As the city's demographics shifted, the population clashed with city politicians with increasing frequency. Red-lining, corruption, and racial profiling, especially by Newark's police department, exacerbated tensions further. This eventually culminated in the 1967 Newark Riots, a five-day period of armed conflict between police and protestors that left 26 people dead, hundreds injured, and \$10 million in damage to the city.³¹ The event took place during the so-called "Long Hot Summer of 1967," a period of nationwide racial protests and riots like those in Newark.

Since then, Newark became a city popularly perceived as 'violent' and 'crime-ridden', lacking the public funding or support to rebuild much of its infrastructure or invest heavily in community engagement. This has had a negative impact on the city's culture of education, has had a negative

²⁷ David Wildstein, "Black Newark Residents Say Their Schools are Segregated, Fairleigh Dickinson University Poll Says," *New Jersey Globe*, August 26, 2021, <https://newjerseyglobe.com/local/black-newark-residents-say-their-schools-are-segregated-fairleigh-dickinson-university-poll-says/>.

²⁸ "Newark city, New Jersey," *United States Census Bureau*, accessed July 25, 2023, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/newarkcitynewjersey>

²⁹ Erin Blakemore, "How the G.I. Bill's Promise was Denied to a Million Black WWII Veterans," *History.com*, June 21, 2023, <https://www.history.com/news/gi-bill-black-wwii-veterans-benefits>.

³⁰ Spencer Furry, "White Picket Fences and the "Worst City in America": Suburbanization and White Flight in the United States and Newark, New Jersey, 1930-2010," *Dartmouth Topics in Digital History*, October 13, 2016, <https://journeys.dartmouth.edu/censushistory/2016/10/31/white-picket-fences-and-the-worst-city-in-america-suburbanization-and-white-flight-in-the-united-states-and-newark-new-jersey-1930-2010/>.

³¹ Rick Rojas and Khorri Atkinson, "Five Days of Unrest that Shaped and Haunted, Newark," *The New York Times*, July 11, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/11/nyregion/newark-riots-50-years.html>.

impact on the city's culture of education, as the current principal of BHSEC Newark, Dr. Carla Stephens, explains:

In the city of Newark, the percentage of people who had post high school degrees was about 14% and so a lot of our students are first generation students. So sometimes parents don't partner with the school well because they're intimidated. We have to keep working on communicating with families in ways that are productive because there is a cultural dissonance, sometimes, between our faculty who have PhDs and our families who some may not even have high school diplomas. So that relationship is also something that we continue to work on.³²

Bard alumnus and current Vice-President and Dean of the Early Colleges Dumaine Williams believed that Newark would welcome the BHSEC program to their city to help provide educational opportunities throughout the city. Williams took the lead on establishing the Newark campus in 2011.³³ In creating this campus, Williams knew that he would have to tailor the school for Newark's specific environment.

Newark: Creating Community-Specific Campuses

One trap that BHSEC must consciously avoid is the impulse to merely transplant Bard College, or even Simon's Rock, onto whichever city they seek to engage with. In order for the BHSEC program to effectively break educational barriers within a community, they must engage on that community's terms. This means that the approach to establishing a campus in New Orleans will be different than the approach for Newark, both of which will differ from the New York City campuses. Regarding this process for Newark, Dumaine Williams stated: "People were concerned about forcing Bard on Newark, but it was more about having a flexible approach to address Newark's specific needs."³⁴

A huge part of this effective community engagement comes from listening to leaders already established within these cities. This means engaging not only with existing educators in the area, but also with faith-based leaders and political leaders alike. Even once the schools had been established, their specific curriculum was tailored for their student population. For example, at the Newark campus, principal Carla Stephens applied Plato's Allegory of the Cave to the student's views of their community. She asked her students to consider what some of the factors holding Newark back from "the light" of education could be. Recounting their responses, she noted:

My expectation was, I was going to hear things like 'poverty' but one of the things that was most surprising that I heard from one student is that it was other people's understanding

³² Carla Stephens in discussion with Seamus Heady.

³³ "Our History," *Bard Early College*, accessed July 25, 2023, <https://bhsec.bard.edu/our-history/>.

³⁴ Dumaine Williams in discussion with Marino Bubba.

of Newark and the people in Newark. So it was very clear to me from the student that what she really wanted to do is go out into the world and show the world that Newark wasn't what stereotypes made Newarkers seem to be, and to prove them wrong. And I am sure that she has accomplished that.³⁵

Tailoring students' academic experience to their experience of the world more broadly is integral to BHSEC's mission of creating a scholarly community for students on campus. This community focus also teaches students how to be citizens as they are compelled to find their place in the world through rigorous academic interrogation and debate with one another. As student Marley Johnson recalled during her senior year at BHSEC Newark:

I think that, as a school, (BHSEC Newark) prepared me to be a citizen of myself. I feel like I've prepared to be a citizen by the constant open debate... What is right in our country? What's wrong with our country? How can we fix the country? I feel like that actually all starts at the school level with the person. If you open these debates at a younger age, you allow for the debates to be more civil, more accurate, and more helpful at the older ages.³⁶

This environment of civil debate prepares students to enter the real world productively, conscientiously and enthusiastically. The learning program at BHSEC does not just cultivate intellectual maturity, though. By fostering a physical learning environment that feels like a traditional college campus, early college campuses do more than just give students collegiate materials; they prepare them for college life in a far more holistic sense.

Student Support and College Preparation

This holistic preparation comes in two major domains. The first is in the classroom. The professors in the BHSEC program often have extensive experience teaching at the university level and 70% have terminal degrees in their fields.³⁷ As a result, they know exactly what information they wish students were taught in preparation for their college classes. Thus, they can craft their own curricula that fills in gaps in students' knowledge base beginning when they first enter the school in 9th grade. In the words of Dr. Celeste Woo, a BHSEC Newark professor:

My ninth graders will tell you, I start talking about college from day one. And because I've had a long career of teaching college and I've taught in many different contexts, different student populations... I can teach (my students) in high school what I've always wanted my college students to know getting into the college class. I talk about study habits, I talk about

³⁵ Carla Stephens in discussion with Seamus Heady.

³⁶ Marley Johnson in discussion with Seamus Heady.

³⁷ Carla Stephens in discussion with Seamus Heady.

time management. I talk about what you have to do to advocate for yourself and to manage multiple complex texts and complex assignments. From day one of ninth grade.³⁸

The second preparatory domain is in supporting students outside of the classroom to allow them the mental and emotional space to be successful at BHSEC. The curriculum is college-level and up to the rigorous standards of Bard College, not “dumbed down” because the students are younger and non-traditional.³⁹ But this does not mean that high school-age students do not require extra support outside of the classroom. In the words of Principle Carla Stephens of BHSEC Newark: “This school isn’t easy. It’s stressful. It’s very difficult, so it is really important for students to understand that they are striving together. They’re going to be successful together, and that’s together as peers and also together with the faculty and staff.”⁴⁰

This support is more than just a feeling of community, though. Early colleges employ counselors and social workers to help students while at BHSEC schools, and also in their transition to the next stages in life, whether that be a four-year institution or something else. In the words of Vice-President and Dean of the Early Colleges Dumaine Williams: “Faculty– the right faculty– is the most important thing... We need those faculty that are willing to dedicate the next stage of their career to something new.”⁴¹

This belief is shared by administrators and students alike. The teachers, encouraged to develop strong relationships with students, are especially important to this support process. Students facing collegiate-level work benefit from the extra level of attention given to them by their teachers, as J’kwon Addles explained during his senior year: “I’m gonna lie to you... it was scary at first because the classes are really tough, but the teachers here... they’re supportive, they have your back and they’re willing to help you through anything.”⁴²

BHSEC administrators recognize that barriers to higher education do not simply disappear once students arrive on campus. Their support is ongoing and consequential. They also recognize that educational accessibility is an ongoing problem across the country, requiring a long-term plan to address the problem.

A Continuous Project: The Future of BHSEC

³⁸ Celeste Woo in discussion with Seamus Heady.

³⁹ Celeste Woo in discussion with Seamus Heady.

⁴⁰ Carla Stephens in discussion with Seamus Heady.

⁴¹ Dumaine Williams in discussion with Marino Bubba.

⁴² J’kwon Addles in discussion with Seamus Heady.

Today, BHSEC has eight campuses around the eastern United States, including in Washington DC, Baltimore, and Cleveland.⁴³ While this is a great start, providing access to higher education for as many students as possible is still the project's goal. The manner in which they plan to achieve this is two-fold. First, BHSEC plans to open two more physical schools in the near future with campuses in the Bronx and Atlanta, Georgia.⁴⁴ These two disparate locations will help bring early college to the 7,000 interested NYC students who apply each year, while also expanding into a different region entirely.

However, this is not the end of BHSEC's future. The program will also bring a program called "Bard Sequence" to high school students across the country. "Bard Sequence" allows high schoolers to take some credits with Bard professors online from anywhere in the country. These credits, much like at the brick and mortar schools, are transferable to when the students make their way into a traditional post-secondary institution. Unlike BHSEC campuses with full degree programs, "Bard Sequence" is not an integrated high school/college program and students graduate with only a high school diploma and some college credits, not an associates degree.⁴⁵ Still, this allows students from anywhere in the country to have a taste of college life, even if it is not the full community, regardless of where they are located geographically. This arm of the project, though less expensive than creating and integrating two entire new brick and mortar schools, still requires funding to implement.

Funding

The fully immersive experience of BHSEC is not cheap in terms of up-front costs. Though certain cost-saving methods are taken when it comes to facilities— such as sharing buildings with pre-existing private and charter schools— qualified, passionate, and experienced professors and support staff are expensive, but crucial to the success of BHSEC students.

In order to pay for these added expenses, the BHSEC program subsidizes its budget with private philanthropic donations. All in all, the public support BHSEC schools receive from state, local, and federal governments covers about 85% of their operating budget. This is enough to run the necessary infrastructure of the schools, such as buses, meals, and facilities. However, the approximately 15% of the school's budgets is used to fund the extra support needed to make BHSEC schools effective college programs in their own rights. This piece of funding comes from private donations.⁴⁶

These donations come in all sizes. Two of the largest donors to the BHSEC program are the Carnegie Corporation of New York and Bloomberg Philanthropies, but the program still relies on thousands of other individual donors to function.⁴⁷ Much of the donations are used to finance the once-and-done up-front costs of starting a school. However, the lines between public and private funds often get blurred, such as

⁴³ "Our Network," *Bard Early College*, accessed July 25, 2023, <https://bhsec.bard.edu/our-network/>.

⁴⁴ Dumaine Williams in discussion with Marino Bubba.

⁴⁵ Dumaine Williams in discussion with Marino Bubba.

⁴⁶ Stephen Tremaine in discussion with Marino Bubba.

⁴⁷ Stephen Tremaine in discussion with Marino Bubba.

with the \$100 million donation made by Mark Zuckerberg to the Newark public school system.⁴⁸ This private donation made the founding of BHSEC Newark possible but only through the public reallocation of wealth.

While BHSEC was not conceived of as a means to save money, it should be noted that early college programs are actually more economically efficient than traditional public schools for both the individual and the government.⁴⁹ At the individual level, all BHSEC schools are free to enroll because of their status as public institutions. This means that every student has the opportunity to complete half of their future college education entirely debt free, potentially saving BHSEC students 50% of the cost of a bachelor's degree.

BHSEC is also more cost-efficient for the government as well. This is because three-quarters of BHSEC enrollees are low-income and eligible for pell grants and other financial aid. When they go to college, these students are largely financed by the state and federal governments. Therefore, the less time they spend getting their degrees, the less money they cost the state. By choosing to put money into the more efficient BHSEC program, the government can save money in the long term.⁵⁰ In the words of Stephen Tremaine, "it isn't about the money, but [BHSEC] is one of those rare examples when stretching the dollar actually leads to a better outcome."⁵¹

Conclusion

As part of their commitment to the liberal arts ideal of accessible education for all members of society, Bard College began sponsoring early college programs in 1979. Through their TLS program, which seeks to foster community engagement and cultivate student citizens, Bard officially launched its Bard High School Early College (BHSEC) program in 2001. The first campus in Manhattan, which offered students the chance to graduate with a high school diploma, an associates degree, and up to 60 transferable college credits, was hugely popular and successful. The program then expanded within New York and then to New Orleans, Newark, and beyond.

At its core, BHSEC is about equalizing an unequal playing field. The communities in which BHSEC campuses are found have experienced historic poverty and segregation that keeps certain communities out of higher education. BHSEC seeks to tear down these barriers and open the world of higher education to all those who seek to be a part of it.

⁴⁸ Carla Stephens in discussion with Seamus Heady.

⁴⁹ Stephen Tremaine in discussion with Marino Bubba.

⁵⁰ Stephen Tremaine in discussion with Marino Bubba.

⁵¹ Stephen Tremaine in discussion with Marino Bubba.