

BARD HIGH SCHOOL EARLY COLLEGE

ENGAGING STUDENTS IN THE LIBERAL ARTS

BHSEC BEST PRACTICES: The Admissions and Outreach Process

About Bard High School Early College

Premised on the belief that many adolescents are ready and eager for greater challenge, Bard High School Early College seeks to provide bright, highly motivated, and diverse students with an intellectually engaging four-year academic program that includes a two-year college liberal arts degree. Students graduate prepared to take upper level college courses, earn a baccalaureate degree, develop successful careers, and contribute to society. First developed in 2001 as a partnership between Bard College and the New York City Department of Education, three BHSEC schools currently operate: BHSEC Manhattan, BHSEC Queens (2008) and most recently, BHSEC Newark (2011), developed by Bard College and the Newark Public Schools.

The BHSEC schools immerse students in the traditions and practices associated with a liberal arts education. Students take high school courses for two years, and then engage in a full college-level course of studies in the eleventh and twelfth grade, graduating high school with an Associate in Arts degree from Bard College. With a faculty of highly qualified scholars and artists that teach both high school and college courses, BHSEC aspires to teach higher-level thinking skills through analytic writing, focused discussion, and in-depth inquiry.

After four years at BHSEC, the majority (88%) of students graduate with a Bard College Associate in Arts degree in the liberal arts and sciences and 60 transferrable college credits. Historically, 98-100% of BHSEC Manhattan and Queens students receive a New York State Regents high school diploma. (BHSEC Newark is still too new to have this historic data regarding either high school or college graduation rates.) More than 97% of BHSEC students continue their studies at a four-year college and most complete their BA/BS degrees.

To help others understand the design underlying the success of Bard High School Early College schools and students, the *National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools and Teaching* at Teachers College, Columbia University undertook a study of several of BHSEC's key practices. They conducted a series of interviews and focus groups with school faculty and leaders, observed classrooms, and reviewed relevant research literature. This series of seven reports provides insights into how the key practices are implemented as well as how they could be replicated by others.

A pro-active Outreach and Admissions process geared at recruiting and then selecting diverse students is key to the BHSEC design. A detailed examination of this BHSEC best practice follows.

An overview of BHSEC's admission process

The BHSEC admissions process is an expression of our values (Michael Lerner, Principal, BHSEC Manhattan).

Students play a significant role in each others' success (Dwight Hodgson, Senior Admissions Officer, BHSEC Manhattan '03)).

A proactive outreach and admission process is central to the BHSEC design. Unlike at other specialized and selective public high schools in New York City, the BHSEC admissions process does not rely primarily on standardized test scores. Rather, students have multiple ways to show who they are and demonstrate their capabilities. They begin by applying to BHSEC and submitting information on their middle school performance and attendance. In addition, they must take BHSEC designed assessments in math and writing. Those who receive acceptable scores are invited to participate in an in-person interview where they often show personal qualities that would allow them to flourish and succeed at BHSEC.

BHSEC views its admissions process as two-way information-sharing that helps students determine whether BHSEC's demanding, liberal arts-focused program is a good fit for them.

Our admissions process is [a way] to inform parents and students because students should also be able to make an informed choice when they have to rank schools (Valeri Thomson, Principal, BHSEC Queens).

BHSEC aims to recruit and enroll highly motivated young people from all five boroughs of New York City and across the Newark school district in New Jersey. The schools emphasize diversity in terms of race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status and are especially interested in enrolling students from groups traditionally underserved in college. The schools' targeted outreach programs – BECA and Smart Scholars – were designed to attract students of such backgrounds.

Each BHSEC campus has its own admissions and outreach team, which works year round on recruitment activities. The NYC BHSECs coordinate their admissions activities and share an Admissions Outreach Coordinator whose job it is to work specifically with middle schools with high populations of low income students and students of color. From September through December of each year, additional faculty members and staff take part in scoring BHSEC assessments and conducting personal interviews with applicants. Faculty members at all campuses volunteer their time for outreach activities, such as open houses and school visits. Principals are also highly involved in the admission process. Students in NYC wishing to apply to both BHSEC Manhattan and BHSEC Queens need only submit one application, which is then considered by each school.

Why the admissions process is important

BHSEC is one of a sub-set of public schools that are explicitly designed to provide a challenging curriculum to highly capable students. These schools are founded on the idea that public education must meet the needs of students across the spectrum of academic challenge and support, including those able to engage in an academically advanced curriculum (Finn and Hockett, 2012). BHSEC makes an explicit commitment to serving students who may be at a disadvantage when it comes to obtaining a high quality education. Thus, the admissions

process must strike a delicate balance, seeking to identify students who can succeed in a rigorous curriculum, while not shutting out those who have not had access to a strong elementary and middle school education.

Many selective public schools use single, high stakes tests to determine who can enroll (Baker, 2012). These tests measure primarily academic (cognitive) skills - and many claim that they are not highly predictive of academic success (Feinman, 2008) or intelligence (Kao, Tienda, and Schneider, 1996). Additionally, racial group differences are repeatedly observed in scores on standardized tests, leading to accusations of bias in the admissions process (Santelices and Wilson, 2010). Therefore, low income students and students of color are typically disadvantaged when test scores alone are used in admission decisions (Sackett, Schmitt, Ellingson, and Kabin, 2001).

Moreover, a considerable body of research suggests that key non-cognitive factors such as inter-personal skills, organizational ability, and perseverance are at least as important as cognitive skills for educational success (Levin, 2012). This research is especially relevant to the design of admission processes. Kyllonen (2012) reviewed a series of studies suggesting that there is now a sufficient research basis to recommend that non-cognitive skills be assessed and considered in college admissions, saying

Findings to date suggest that adding non-cognitive assessments to an existing cognitive assessment is likely to lead to better student performance (through higher predictive validities) and also a more diverse cohort (through less adverse impact against historically underrepresented groups). (p. 96).

Research also demonstrates that student motivation is critical to academic success. Kaufman et al. (2008) conducted a study that found intrinsic motivation to be a significant predictor of good academic outcomes in a sample drawn from a largely non-traditional college student population at a Hispanic-serving institution. Qualities related to motivation such as self-efficacy (Chemers, Hu, and Garcia, 2001), academic tenacity (Gurantz and Borsato, 2012), and self-discipline (Duckworth and Seligman, 2005) are also associated with positive academic outcomes.

Non-cognitive skills and personal qualities such as motivation can be challenging to measure, one reason that they are less often emphasized in admissions decisions. However, they may be especially important to success in a rigorous academic environment. Thus the BHSEC admissions process—particularly the writing assessment and the interview—is designed to learn about students’ motivation, curiosity, desire to learn, interest in the world around them and work ethic.

Furthermore, the admissions process is viewed by some experts as a kind of “courtship” (Gyure and Arnold, 2001) in which both parties assess their fit with the other. Parents and students need to understand what a long-term “relationship” with the school will be like, and decide whether it is likely to be a positive one. At the same time, the school is making decisions about a student’s suitability for admission. In conducting outreach and admissions, BHSEC emphasizes the importance of getting to know students and parents and exchanging ideas about needs and expectations. The BHSEC admissions process is, therefore, extensive and allows for in-depth, two-way communication.

The students BHSEC looks for

When I choose students, I try to think about how they would work together in a classroom. For example, in the Seminar course, we need students with different perspectives. We want students to bounce ideas off of each other; we need chemistry among students (Dwight Hodgson, Senior Admissions Officer, BHSEC Manhattan).

According to BHSEC staff, the ultimate goal is to build a freshman class of diverse students who will work together well. BHSEC admissions staff seek students who are intelligent, hard-working, display intellectual curiosity, show a love of learning, and who exhibit intrinsic motivation, an ability to persevere under difficult circumstances, sincerity, a potential for growth, maturity and responsibility, and an understanding of the mission of the school. Staff also look for students who participate in activities outside of school as evidence of passion, motivation and interest in the world around them. Admissions staff particularly hope to identify students who have a “voice” and express themselves well in the writing assessment and during the interview - students who have something to say about the world around them.

Steps in the admissions process

The writing assessment and interviews stand out to students and parents and show that the school is very different. They understand that this school is based on intellectual curiosity; it's not like other schools (Dwight Hodgson, Senior Admissions Officer, BHSEC Manhattan).

The admission process at BHSEC's New York campuses is integrated into the overall New York City high school admissions process. Students submit their rankings to the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) of up to 12 high school programs from over 600 offered citywide. Schools, in turn, evaluate students based on their own admissions criteria and submit rank ordered lists to the NYCDOE of the students who they would admit.¹ BHSEC Newark is part of the Newark Public School system, which has recently implemented an admissions process similar to that of the NYCDOE, in which students must apply for admission and rank the schools of their choice.

BHSEC schools evaluate applicants based on the following:

- Middle school grades.
- Standardized test scores, *i.e.*, 8th grade state math and English language arts scores in NYC and 8th grade ACT scores in Newark.
- Attendance and punctuality in middle school.
- BHSEC math assessment of skills that should have been acquired by the end of 7th grade.
- BHSEC writing assessment based on a text provided to the applicant with a prompt for a two-part essay.
- Personal qualities as revealed in individual interviews.

¹ For more information, see <http://schools.nyc.gov/ChoicesEnrollment/High/Admissions/default.htm>, <http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/ronlyres/8C191027-D2EC-4FAA-BF00-DF5C9E100031/87329/FAQ.pdf>

The high school admissions process begins in the early fall for 8th graders in both New York City and Newark. In order to be considered for BHSEC, students need to have a grade point average of 85% or above, a score of proficient or above on state writing and math exams, and no more than 10 unexcused absences or 10 late arrivals (tardies) for the school year. All students who wish to be considered must also take the BHSEC designed writing assessments. Due to differences in the 8th grade exams given between Newark and New York City, only students applying to BHSEC Manhattan and BHSEC Queens must also take a BHSEC developed math assessment.

Students who pass the BHSEC math assessment with a minimum of 68% and receive a rating of at least 3 out of 5 on the BHSEC writing assessment, and who meet the criteria for middle school grades, test scores and attendance, are invited to take part in individual interviews. Admissions staff, principals, and faculty members conduct the interviews. In New York City, interviews take place on almost a daily basis throughout October, November and December each year; in Newark, interviews take place between January and April. Based on all of the information gathered, the Admissions officers, working with the Principals and Deans, rank applicants for submission to the public school district. The NYCDOE and the Newark Public Schools then match students and schools based on the rankings submitted by each.

By the numbers:

In the 2012-13 year, BHSEC Manhattan and Queens received applications from 6107 students, interviewed 1,893 and ranked 1,492 for 300 seats. Of these, 259 enrolled in the fall of 2013. BHSEC Newark assessed 1,968, interviewed ranked 804 and matched 450 for a class of 80 students who enrolled in the fall of 2013.

Using interviews to learn about students

A wide range of BHSEC staff conduct prospective student interviews. The admissions staff provides a set of questions that the interviewer can choose from and a rubric for scoring responses and then trains the interviewers on approach and scoring. The whole process requires a great deal of time and commitment from BHSEC staff and faculty. However, in a focus group, staff members talked about how highly they value these experiences – and about qualities that they look for in applicants:

If students can imagine ... their future plans - that's a good indicator. 'What do you expect college to be like?' If students can imagine that, that's always a good sign (Dumaine Williams, Dean of Students, BHSEC Newark).

Kids might get excited about one single topic. This tells us if there is something that sparks them, even if they seem a little bored with school (Valeri Thomson, Principal, BHSEC Queens).

If they have gotten engaged in something, whatever it is, if they have brought discipline to something – say, swimming – there is a good chance they will bring that passion into academics (Martha Olson, Dean of Administration, BHSEC Manhattan).

I don't like when students say 'I have issues with my school; it's the teachers' fault.' (Dwight Hodgson, Senior Admissions Officer, BHSEC Manhattan).

Two school leaders described how they sometimes question students in the interview about math problems they answered incorrectly in the BHSEC assessment.

This helps us understand how students look at learning; we give them a one on one tutorial in the interview to see if they are open to learning (Valeri Thomson, Principal, BHSEC Queens)

With a little probing, are they ready to look at it again and learn? Are they willing to look back at something? (Patricia Sharpe, Dean of Studies, BHSEC Queens).

Overall, interviews are seen as a way to learn about students' true academic and creative potential as well as the likelihood that they will contribute to and feel at home in the BHSEC community. It is also a way to learn about the kind of support that students have from parents and other adults in their lives, as well as their interests and values.

Outreach activities

Even if [your school is] popular, you have to go out to reach students to get a diverse class. Outreach is extremely important (Olga Carmona, Director of Admissions, BHSEC Queens).

The BHSEC schools make a concerted effort to reach out to traditionally underserved students whose parents and middle schools may not be well informed about the different school choice options offered in New York City and Newark. All campuses conduct regular information sessions and maintain close contact with middle schools serving high numbers of low-income and racially diverse students. They hold regular open houses at each of the BHSEC campuses and offer multiple opportunities to take the BHSEC assessments. The open houses include sessions where information on the school is presented, and parents and students can ask questions of school leaders, faculty, and students.

The schools also participate in a series of middle school fairs, designed to help parents and students learn about the range of high school options that exist in New York City and Newark. At one of these, a BHSEC representative answered questions from parents and 8th graders about the school, telling them:

- *There is no such thing as 11th and 12th grade at BHSEC. There is Year 1 and 2 of college. You can choose most of your classes during these two [college] years.*
- *There are mostly Ph.D. prepared faculty; the schools are proud of this.*
- *If you go to BHSEC, you graduate with two years of free college credit; these will transfer to most colleges. You can save a lot of money.*
- *There's no school uniform.*
- *This school is great for students who want to be challenged.*
- *Kids have an easy time when they transfer to college. They are very well prepared.*
- *BHSEC has two graduations—one from high school and the other from college.*

These kinds of messages help to convey BHSEC's core philosophy and school design to students and parents as well as to inform them about the admissions process.

BECA and Smart Scholars

In addition to the general outreach activities, BHSEC has developed two programs specifically intended to reach traditionally underserved students across New York City: *The Bard Early College Academy* (BECA) and the *Smart Scholars Early College High School Program*. These efforts receive funding from the New York State Department of Education and private foundations.

The Bard Early College Academy (BECA) is an academic enrichment program for middle school students in grades six through eight from low performing middle schools located near BHSEC Manhattan and attended by large numbers of low-income and minority students. BECA's goal is to help these traditionally under-served students to develop the skills needed to become strong and successful candidates for selective high schools in New York City. Founded in 2005, BECA serves students from six public middle schools surrounding the BHSEC Manhattan campus. All but one are Title 1 schools with more than 70% of the student population eligible for free or reduced price lunch. Since the spring of 2011, the program has provided an after-school program under the NYSED Extended School Day Grant offering a mix of math, humanities, science and study skills classes Tuesday-Thursday after school during the academic year and Monday-Thursday during the month of July.

The BECA faculty is comprised of BHSEC teachers and middle school teachers trained in the BHSEC Writing & Thinking pedagogy. In addition, a full-time guidance counselor offers parent workshops on topics ranging from the high school admissions process to stress management. The BECA program employs BHSEC high school students as mentors who assist the teachers and act as role models for the participants. Eighty-six sixth, seventh and eighth graders were enrolled in BECA during the 2012-2013 school year. Twelve BECA alumni entered one of the BHSEC schools in fall 2012; eight enrolled in fall 2013, with another twelve enrolling in other selective schools, including five in the highly competitive specialized schools.

The NYSED funded *Smart Scholars program* was created in 2010 to increase the numbers of underserved students in early college programs in New York State. BHSEC's *Smart Scholars* program specifically targets students from socioeconomically disadvantaged and academically underperforming middle schools—those that have a student body that is at least 80% free or reduced price eligible and designated a school in need of improvement (SINI) or a school under registration review (SURR). Eighth-graders are guided through the process of applying for entry into BHSEC schools as well as other selective high schools in New York.

As part of this program, BHSEC conducts recruitment efforts year round to ensure that the student population of BHSEC reflects the demographics of New York City. This involves targeted outreach to students from middle schools in low-income neighborhoods with large populations of students traditionally underserved in college. Admissions counselors canvass local schools, offer workshops, meet with guidance counselors and school administrators, speak with community members and parents, and meet with potential students singly and in groups. The program is also designed to provide additional support to students recruited through *Smart Scholars* once they enroll in a BHSEC school.

The BHSEC Class of 2015 includes the first group of *Smart Scholars* actively recruited as part of the program. Twenty-three of them were admitted to BHSEC Manhattan and 49 were admitted to BHSEC Queens in 2011. By the fall of 2013, the number of Smart Scholars recruited to BHSEC Manhattan and Queens exceeded 90 ninth graders.

Positive results

Does the BHSEC outreach and admissions process result in a student body that is aligned with BHSEC's mission? Do students who enroll in BHSEC perform well in the school and thereafter?

BHSEC is quite diverse in terms of socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity, especially compared to New York City public schools, which tend to be highly segregated by race/ethnicity. In 2012-2013, twenty-three percent of students at BHSEC Manhattan, 43% of students at BHSEC Queens and 75% of students at BHSEC Newark were eligible for free or reduced lunch. In addition, Table A shows the racial-ethnic composition of students attending BHSEC schools in the fall of 2012. Across the three schools, 42% of students are African American or Hispanic, i.e., groups traditionally underserved in college.

Table A: Racial-ethnic composition of students attending BHSEC schools (fall 2012)

Racial-ethnic composition	Hispanic or Latino	Asian	Black or African American	White	Other
BHSEC Manhattan	18%	15%	16%	50%	1%
BHSEC Queens	19%	32%	12%	35%	2%
BHSEC Newark	19%	1%	74%	3%	3%

At the same time, students who are admitted to BHSEC schools have high rates of success despite the challenge of undertaking college level work beginning in 11th grade. Table B shows their high school and college graduation rates as well as the proportion who matriculates into 4-year colleges.²

Table B: Student outcomes

	BHSEC – Manhattan Class of 2013	BHSEC – Queens Class of 2013	BHSEC—Newark Class of 2013
High school graduation rate	97%	98.5%	90%
Proportion of graduates who earned an associate's degree (60+ college credits)	95%	89%	66%

² Members of the BHSEC Newark Class of 2013 entered BHSEC in 11th grade, the first year of the school and the first of the college program..

Proportion of graduates enrolling in 4-year colleges	95+%	95+%	88%
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Replication

BHSEC needs these kids [of diverse backgrounds], or else we are not BHSEC.
(Olga Carmona, Smart Scholars Outreach Coordinator).

BHSEC's comprehensive admissions process requires a high level of commitment and resources. However, there is firm agreement among BHSEC faculty and admissions staff that the importance of a diverse student body justifies the investment of time and money. Not only does the process result in a dynamic and multi-faceted new class each year, but there is a feeling of connection and commitment between school staff and students from the moment the new cohort enters in the fall.

Schools interested in replicating parts of BHSEC admission process, are "advised to be open to having students come in from all sorts of backgrounds and [with diverse] qualities" (Dwight Hodgson, Senior Admissions Officer, BHSEC Manhattan). Further, the admissions process "is not only about getting the top-performing kids" (Jennifer Demello, Admissions Associate Director, BHSEC Queens), it is also "important to [look at] whether there is a fit between student and school" (Michael Lerner, Principal, BHSEC Manhattan). What is more, "it is important to tell students what they are getting into. For some students it is really good to just have four years of high school; not every student is ready to do college work at that age" (Valeri Thomson, Principal, BHSEC Queens).

BHSEC has developed a clear set of procedures, assessments, and templates that can provide guidance to schools wishing to replicate this admissions model; professional development on the admissions process can also be requested. For more information, contact Martha Olson at olson@bard.edu. Parents and students seeking information about current admissions events and deadlines should consult www.bard.edu/bhsec/admissions/.

The BHSEC folio series is a publication of BHSEC, in collaboration with the National Center for the Restructuring of Education, Schools, and Teaching (NCREST), a research center at Teachers College, Columbia University. The series includes information on seven exemplary practices associated with the three BHSEC schools. Each publication in the series is based on qualitative research conducted by NCREST.

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