

BARD HIGH SCHOOL EARLY COLLEGE
ENGAGING STUDENTS IN THE LIBERAL ARTS
BHSEC BEST PRACTICES: Seminar

About Bard High School Early College

Premised on the belief that many adolescents are ready and eager for the greater challenge, scope and rigor of a liberal arts college while still in high school, Bard High School Early College seeks to provide bright, highly motivated and diverse students with an intellectually engaging comprehensive 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 become productive members of 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 in collaboration with the Newark Public Schools.

The BHSEC schools immerse students in the traditions and practices that reflect the best that a liberal arts college has to offer. Students take high school courses for two years, and then engage in college-level coursework in the eleventh and twelfth grade, graduating high school with an Associate of Arts degree from Bard College. With a faculty of engaged scholars and artists who teach both high school and college courses, BHSEC provides a rigorous curriculum that builds 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, in addition to a New York State Regents high school diploma or New Jersey high school diploma. 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 students and the BHSEC schools, the National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools and Teaching at Teachers College, Columbia University undertook a study of BHSEC's key practices. They conducted a series of interviews and focus groups with school leaders, staff and faculty, classroom observations, and a review of relevant research literature. Seminar, a four semester sequence required for all of the BHSEC early college students, was the first practice to be examined. A detailed examination of this practice follows.

An Introduction to Seminar

If there is one class that prepares students for college, Seminar is the one. (BHSEC Administrator)

Seminar is one of BHSEC's exemplary practices and is patterned after Bard College's well established and highly regarded First-Year Seminar, also taught at Bard College at Simon's Rock, Bard's residential early college in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. Seminar introduces students to their roles as scholars and critical thinkers at the collegiate level.

Firmly grounded in the liberal arts tradition, which aims to foster in students the ability to think critically and communicate proficiently (Becker, 2003), the BHSEC Seminar model integrates a number of unique educational practices. BHSEC's Seminar curriculum is characterized by an interactive, student-centered pedagogy that requires students to engage directly with texts, both inside and outside of the classroom.

BHSEC students enroll in Seminar for four semesters during their two college years at BHSEC¹ (called Year 1 and Year 2 of college). Year 1 Seminar focuses on the critical reading of influential works of literature, philosophy, science, economics and history from antiquity through the 18th century. Year 2 Seminar exposes students to a range of texts from the 19th and 20th centuries and concludes with an examination of "the modern condition." All students are required to write a Year 2 thesis. Classes are taught "seminar-style" with an emphasis on active discussion, student presentations, and a variety of challenging writing assignments.

The Rationale for Seminar

Research demonstrates that a liberal arts education of the type embodied in Seminar provides significant value to students. The results of a study by Pascarella et al (2005) indicated that a liberal arts college education had a positive impact on students' openness to diversity and challenge, learning for self-understanding, and writing skills. In a review of available research, Seifert et al (2010) concluded that liberal arts colleges provide in-class academic experiences that are more grounded in challenge and interaction than do research universities and regional institutions. Kuh (2003) synthesized research suggesting that, because of the interactive engagement expected in their classes, liberal arts college students gain more in terms of intellectual and personal development than their peers at other institutions, more frequently pursue advanced graduate study, and are more likely to vote and to engage in civic activities. At BHSEC, Seminar serves as the gateway into a collegiate liberal arts classroom experience.

Seminar introduces students to a higher level of intellectual rigor and expectations in the context of intimate, supportive classes taught by college faculty. Building on instructional approaches first introduced to them in the BHSEC intensive Writing and Thinking workshop², students learn to use the intellectual tools and habits of mind that help them to succeed in college. For BHSEC students, Seminar eases the transition from high school to college and introduces BHSEC's young students to postsecondary norms and expectations, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will complete a college education (Conley, 2007).

BHSEC students agree with the intent and role of Seminar as critical to BHSEC's early college

¹ Grades eleven and twelve in a traditional high school

² The Writing and Thinking Workshop is an intensive, weeklong series of workshops required for all BHSEC students at the beginning of each school year modeled after the Freshman Learning & Thinking workshops required of all incoming freshmen at Bard College and Bard College at Simon's Rock.

mission. In an exit survey given to the Class of 2012, 97% of the graduating students said that Seminar was an important part of their BHSEC experience and 91% believed that it had prepared them well for college.

Instruction in the liberal arts context

"[In liberal arts education], it is not simply the substance of teaching that is different but the entire approach to the educational process. An interactive, student-centered pedagogy means that the classroom is not a one-way transmission belt of knowledge from professor to student. Specifically, instruction does not simply consist of a teacher reading lectures to students, as is common throughout much of the world. Instead, learning within the classroom is an interactive process. The classroom is an environment in which students are encouraged to question assumptions and conclusions and to learn from each other, thus democratizing the learning experience."

(Jonathan Becker's essay "What a Liberal Arts Education Is—and Is Not"
From: http://iile.bard.edu/international/#_ftn1)

Seminar classes benefit from the relatively small class size that BHSEC maintains, with a maximum of 20-25 students per class and extended instructional hours -- 113 hours of Seminar classroom instruction per academic year, compared with 86 hours for Bard College's First Year Seminar. The longer class time at BHSEC allows Bard's rigorous college curriculum to be adapted to a non-residential early college environment, permitting students to explore texts in depth and become fully engaged in their reading. It also has the benefit of enabling deeper analysis of each text as well as the opportunity to build stronger relationships among students and between students and teachers.

The design of Seminar is grounded in the following ideas:

- Seminar serves as an *introduction to college level work* that helps students to learn how to engage with the critical thinking and analysis that distinguishes high-level college work. Research has shown that academically oriented first-year seminar courses at regular four-year colleges lead to higher student satisfaction (Hendel, 2006), higher student retention (Schnell and Doetkott, 2003), and higher academic performance (Potts and Schultz 2008) among students who may be at higher risk of failure.
- Seminar follows the *Great Books approach* in its curriculum design. A Great Books curriculum consists primarily of the classic works of the Western intellectual tradition. Advocates of such programs argue that reading and understanding these books prepares students from a range of educational, social, and cultural backgrounds to think independently and rigorously (Meehan, 2010; Shaffer, 2009). Students encounter arguments from a range of traditions and have to make sense of contradicting theologies and philosophies. Kronman (2007) believes that a Great Books program "provides students with a broad, structured, and shared introduction to the alternative views of life's purpose and value that ought to be weighed as they struggle to define life's meaning for themselves"

(p. 42).

- Seminar is based on the belief that thoughtful writing enriches and enlivens the classroom experience in all disciplines. Research supports the idea that writing contributes to student learning (Bangert-Drowns, Hurley, and Wilkinson, 2004). Seminar was developed to create an opportunity for students to practice writing as a means of developing their thinking on a topic or issue. Classroom sessions are structured so that ideas are expressed in writing, read aloud, and then enhanced and deepened through reflecting on feedback from fellow students and faculty.

Seminar Texts

I was more than prepared for success in "real" college, largely owing to what I learned at BHSEC. As a rising sophomore at Williams College, I frequently [referred] back to my Seminar experience. (Alumnus, class of '08)

Each year, BHSEC faculty develop a reading list for the Seminar classes based on those used at Bard College and Bard College at Simon's Rock. The teachers at each school collectively select the texts they will use in their Seminar classes and, while there are some core texts that are used consistently, the reading lists differ slightly at each of the three BHSEC campuses.

In a given year, all students in the same grade level at each BHSEC school read the same texts, giving them a common language and set of ideas that influence their thinking and conversations. Teachers emphasize that it is very important to challenge students and give them the opportunity to grapple with challenging themes and ideas. Teachers work with Seminar participants to help them understand the utility of the texts and the ways in which they may resonate with students' own lives. The Seminar curriculum is explicitly multidisciplinary; therefore, classes are taught by faculty from different scholarly disciplines. This diversity of perspectives, faculty members report, fascinates and engages students.

The reading list for Seminar is comprised of original texts. The list for Year I Seminar at BHSEC (2011-2012) included the following texts, listed in the order read:

- Gardner and Maeir, *Gilgamesh: Translated from the Sin-leqi-unninni version*
- *The Bible (King James Version)*
- Plato, *The Republic*.
- Euripides, *The Bacchae*.
- Sophocles, *The Oedipus Plays*
- Homer, *The Iliad*
- Augustine. *Confessions*.
- Dante, *Inferno*
- Machiavelli, *The Prince*
- Shakespeare, *Hamlet*
- Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*
- Mozart, *Don Giovanni* (the opera, in translation)

- Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*
- *Selected works of Locke, Rousseau and Wollstonecraft*

The reading list for Year II Seminar 2011-12) included the following, listed in the order taught:

- Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*
- Darwin, *The Descent of Man*
- Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*
- Forster, *A Passage to India*
- Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*
- Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*
- Kafka, *The Trial*
- Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*
- Frayn, *Copenhagen*
- Selections from Joyce, Arendt, Foucault and Baldwin

Learning Goals and Teaching Approach

Seminar has a foundational element to it, grounding participants in their identity as scholars and students. (BHSEC Principal)

The overarching goals of the Seminar classes are: 1) to expose students to enduring works of great thinkers and writers and 2) to help students acquire the knowledge and skills needed for academic success, both at BHSEC and at their subsequent colleges and universities.

The BHSEC Seminar instructional approach has six key components that were identified through the NCREST research. Each helps students to develop important knowledge and skills.

1) Building a class culture of mutual respect and free discourse

Teachers build a distinctive Seminar culture with each new class of students. They convey that the classroom is a safe place to struggle with complicated ideas. Students are taught that their opinions - and those of their peers - matter and that there are many questions that do not have an obvious right or wrong answer. Students' classroom presentations, for example, often show at least two different ways of looking at an issue and then guide listeners through the process needed to reach a well-reasoned stance. Such a culture gives students the chance to take control of their learning and the confidence required to take risks. Formerly shy students have expressed that the safe environment provided in Seminar has helped them to open up in class and share their ideas. The positive feedback from other students has helped them to start believing that their opinions have merit.

It's about developing such an intense culture in the class that the students themselves are running things by the end of the semester. (Seminar teacher)

2.) Engagement with and interpretation of primary texts:

Students in Seminar engage with primary texts written by authors who have received scholarly,

artistic, and sometimes popular acclaim over time. Texts are selected by the faculty not only on the intrinsic merit of the work, but also based on the important ideas they present about how to live fully as an individual and a member of society. Students are introduced to the history of ideas—how people have thought and what they have valued through different stages of Western civilization as well as what it means to be a literate adult. Students are encouraged to examine and critique assumptions underlying the ideas studied.

Teachers stress the importance of helping students to understand individual texts in their historical and intellectual contexts and to consider contemporary issues in light of questions that have engaged humanity over time. Themes explored include the relationship between self and society, the nature of values and responsibility, and the struggle to differentiate between reality and appearance. The constant engagement with challenging texts helps students to read carefully and critically.

"[My most memorable BHSEC experience was] probably Seminar. I've always had really engaging Seminar questions, and my teachers have truly pushed me and my peers to look at questions in a new light. I feel as if my class and I went through all of the trials and tribulations of both classic and modern literature and society." (Graduating Year 2 student)

3.) Learning analytical skills through frequent writing assignments:

Seminar students are assigned a variety of graded and ungraded writing homework and in-class activities. Students improve their analytical skills through frequent responses to teacher prompts, free-writing in their journals about readings, and work on extended research projects. Assigned essays typically require both research and reflection. Teachers often use rubrics to convey their expectations about organization, content, and language usage.

"Writing and Thinking is based on the principle that writing is as much a means toward thinking as it is a result of it." (BHSEC Principal)

Examples of a homework writing prompts:

- *"How does Rousseau's claim about force relate to slavery?" (One page free-write homework assignment, due the next day; Year 1 Seminar)*
- *"Think about how prison has entered our imagination." (Year 2 Seminar)*

Example of an in-class focused free write:

- *"Did this assignment give you a chance to do something that the prior assignment did not? If so, can you say what it was?" (Year 2 Seminar)*

Example of a formal essay assignment:

- *"Explain Du Bois' concepts of "double consciousness" and "the Veil." According to Du Bois, in what ways do African Americans experience these concepts? Explain the inherent tension and duality in this experience. How does this tension guide Du Bois' "*

notions about how to deal with the problem of “the color line” at the turn of the twentieth century? Do you find Du Bois’ characterization of the tension of African American experience compelling? Do you find his proposed responses to these tensions compelling? Why or why not?” (six-page essay, Year 2 Seminar)

4.) Teaching the tools needed for intellectual discussion and argumentation:

Classroom discussion lies at the heart of the Seminar class. In the words of a BHSEC teacher, “In Seminar, the discussion IS the Seminar.” Students are expected to be active participants in all classroom discussions. Together with attendance and presentations, participation in classroom discussion comprises 15-30% of the final grade. For discussions to be rich and substantive, students are expected to come to Seminar prepared to support their opinions by referring to specific passages in the text.

Students learn to properly articulate an argument or claim, ground it in textual evidence, consider counter-arguments, and express themselves effectively. Students regularly report to their professors that they have become so engaged in their class discussions that they continue their conversations with fellow students outside the classroom.

Examples of questions asked by the teacher to open up a discussion in class:

- *“Why might someone be considered a good or desirable spouse?” (Year 2 Seminar)*
- *“Are men born to be slaves? Are people born to be poor?” (Year 1 Seminar)*

The focus on critical thinking and close examination and discussion of text I enjoyed in particular, and some of my classes, such as the Seminar classes (which I loved), managed to take all this to a level I've yet to experience even in upper-division courses at my university. (Alumnus, class of '09)

5.) Conducting research:

Students are also taught the tools of scholarly inquiry, including library research, using scholarly journals, web-based research, citation standards, citing reference materials, avoiding plagiarism, evaluating source materials, and effective analytical writing. Students engage in research in the context of regular course assignments as well as in the final thesis, a 15 – 20 page original research paper required at the end of Year 2 Seminar and a pre-requisite for BHSEC graduation.

My BHSEC education was instrumental in developing my research skills and teaching me how to use invaluable academic tools like JSTOR and EBSCO. My Year 2 Seminar thesis taught me how to effectively perform library research and gather non-

electronic materials for a research paper. Not only has my experience at BHSEC prepared me for study at the collegiate level, but has also given me an advantage over my peers in graduate school (Alumna, Class of 2006).

6.) Gaining leadership skills:

Each student is expected to present on a topic and lead a classroom discussion during the course of the semester. The use of peer review workshops in Seminar classes is a further example of students taking responsibility for the creation of a scholarly community. Teachers report that peer review workshops encourage students not only to read more intensely, listen more closely, and respond more carefully to one another's work, but also to apply these skills to identify and correct problems in their own writing.

BHSEC students enter four-year colleges with an advantage. They are fully formed little scholars. Students come back and say that they are very successful at the new colleges and that their professors are impressed with them. (BHSEC teacher)

Seminar "Snapshots"

Researchers visited Seminar classes in the spring of 2012. They observed classrooms with students sitting around tables organized in a circle so that all students faced each other, facilitating discussion. Some of the moments that they observed provide insights into the Seminar experience:

- In a Year 2 class that had read Michel Foucault's *The Body of the Condemned*, the discussion question was, "Which is better: public and spectacular punishments like hangings, floggings, etc. or modern day institutionalization?" Students' responses included: "People in old times had more compassion with the person being punished"; "It's worse now because you have no idea what happens behind closed doors"; "What about paying for the prisoners? There are economic implications for society"; "You have to change society so that people don't do bad things and end up in jail."
- In another Year 2 class, students were given five minutes to write on the topic, "What is an author?" and to note how their thoughts had changed since reading Barthes and Foucault. The instructor had all the students read what they had written aloud and to speak up when their fellow classmates said something that resonated with their own thoughts. As students discussed how their thoughts about "authorship" had evolved, they referenced other texts by Virginia Wolfe, Tolstoy, and Nietzsche, read earlier in the semester.
- In a Year 1 class, students had read chapters from Rousseau's *Social Contract*. A discussion was underway about when the use of force is legitimate and who should have the power to use force. Students struggled with the text but referred to it often and helped each other out by suggesting proper pronunciations and meanings of words. Some student responses: "Just because somebody uses force doesn't mean it's moral," citing Hitler as an example. "Sometimes force is necessary, but nobody should use physical force to try to make somebody believe in what you believe; that's not moral." "People need to be forced...or scared to do what's right, e.g. people don't steal because

they are scared of prison.” When students gave simple one-word responses, they were prompted by the instructor to elaborate and then were able to do so.

Across all classrooms visited, a culture of respect was evident. Students listened to each other and responded to each other’s arguments. Students also admitted when they did not understand a text, showing comfort in discussing their challenges in front of their peers. They expressed very divergent ideas and acknowledged that they disagreed at times. The discussions were mainly student-led, with the teacher serving more as a moderator than an instructor. Students referenced each other’s comments in their responses, making connections and drawing comparisons among different texts read in class.

The Seminar series has been very major for me, especially because I had two of the best teachers. These guys forced me to think critically about everything and I loved every minute of it! I believe I was enlightened while sitting in their Seminar classes. Never ever get rid of Seminar or try to dilute its excellence. (Graduating Year 2 student)

How could another school create Seminar?

Seminar probably can’t be done at every school, but there is something about Seminar that could take root in many different schools with proper support. (BHSEC principal)

Schools wanting to create Seminar need to prepare students to engage in rigorous coursework. BHSEC does this by designing 9th and 10th grade high school courses that require extensive reading, critical thinking, and writing so that students are prepared when they start the college-level Seminar. In addition, BHSEC starts each school year with a one-week intensive program for all students called Writing and Thinking Workshop. This workshop, and the pedagogy associated with it, helps students become accustomed to intensive scholarly engagement.

Having the right faculty is essential. While most BHSEC faculty have PhDs in their subject matter, this is not a prerequisite to replicating the Seminar course, according to the faculty interviewed. However, it is vital that teachers take a critical approach to the text and search - along with the students - for deeper levels of meaning and understanding.

What makes Seminar work is to have a faculty that can engage students at the level needed, teachers who are willing to think on their feet, teachers who show that we are all vulnerable and struggle with ideas, too. (BHSEC Teacher)

Additionally, regular faculty training enhances the quality of Seminar. At the beginning of every new school year, faculty members attend workshops where they learn techniques that will help them engage students in writing assignments and discussion groups. Faculty who teach Seminar at each of the Bard undergraduate campuses—including Simon’s Rock and the BHSECs—meet at least annually to discuss and compare curriculum and texts.

A school wanting to implement Seminar can take advantage of resources available at BHSEC and Bard College. Existing syllabi, texts and materials are available online at www.bard.edu/queens/catalogue (click on the “Literature” link). Faculty from other schools may

also participate in Bard College's intensive training sessions on Writing and Thinking curricula; to register, go to www.bard.edu/iwt/.

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.

The development of these folios has been undertaken with support from the Booth Ferris Foundation and Bard College. For more information on the BHSEC model and this series, contact: Martha Olson at olson@bard.edu.

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