

Early College Folio

The House of Education Needs Overhaul

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Imagine

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EDITORS' NOTE: *This is one of several responses to Elizabeth Blodgett Hall's "[The House of Education Needs Overhaul](#)." Hall was the founder and president emeritus of Bard College at Simon's Rock, the only full-time, four-year, residential college of the liberal arts and sciences designed for students ready for college after the 10th or 11th grade. Hall's article is published alongside these responses by early college leaders in this first issue of Early College Folio.*

In 1967 when Mrs. Hall wrote "The House of Education Needs Overhaul," I was the "hippie" she feared any student would become who had not been granted the middle years of free inquiry she was advocating. Then, as now, awareness of the history of racial oppression in America was intense. Protest against our involvement in Viet Nam was building; and the advent of oral contraceptives for women had enabled us to challenge the gender roles of the 1950s. Who wouldn't choose to protest, to march? Make love not war?

Mrs. Hall's description of the moment is so interesting: "Without a program for replacing war with peace and hate with love, what action remains other than protest, the expression of a corrosively contradictory state of mind which hates everybody who doesn't love everybody else? This is as they see it."¹ Yup. That's how we saw it. But was it really the expression of a "corrosively contradictory state of mind?" Not at all! Replace war with peace? Who wouldn't want to? For me, it was a moment of idealism, of believing change was possible, of "imagining" four years before John Lennon wrote the song; already we could imagine "all the people living life in peace."

It is interesting to me that Mrs. Hall's hypothetical student of that era is a generic male, given that she was a woman herself, as were her students at Concord Academy and in the first classes at Simon's Rock. Like them, I was the product of an independent school for girls and had been inspired intellectually by women teachers, most unmarried for reasons I was then too naïve to imagine, and a head of school who was daring and unconventional like Mrs. Hall, but by 1967 I understood that world to be an outgrowth of and reaction to male privilege, a compensatory space for which I no longer had any patience.

Although this article and Mrs. Hall's argument in it seem motivated in part by a fear of those disaffected youth of the '60s and a sense that our protests would be fruitless, in person she herself was a rebel who responded to challenges to

her authority with remarkable aplomb. As René Biber, long-time professor of French at Simon's Rock recounted, at their first meeting, his interview for a position, she arrived uncharacteristically late and dripping wet, having leapt into the ice-cold spring-fed pool, fully dressed in her tweed suit, to make a point. Another time, when asked by a student eager to impeach the president of Simon's Rock how to interpret the relevant by-laws, she patiently went over the particulars, before asking in a casual aside, "You do know I AM the president?" to which the student replied, "Oh, yes. You're a very nice lady. But I'm doing this on principle!"

In that situation, it seems, Mrs. Hall was living up to her belief that what was best for a student at this age was to take "adult responsibility for the views he (sic) holds." Nevertheless, she envisions this responsibility as intellectual rather than actual: "Before vocational or professional training," students in their later teens "should become acquainted with the whole range of human inquiry... without regard for what one has to do for a living."² At that time, in that milieu, it may have been possible for her (female) students, as it was for me, to follow the expected path from private girl's school to college, then expected marriage and motherhood without much concern about making a living. My single mother, who worked as a secretary, did insist I take a typing class in the summer, but that was the extent of it.

Today's students, coming to Simon's Rock at fifteen or sixteen, both males and females, are already deeply concerned about finding a vocation, about their survival and that of our planet. The four years of intellectual engagement free of the pressure to determine their life's course that Mrs. Hall envisioned is just not available to them. Many come hoping to get an earlier start on making their way in a world and know that is simply not possible without a college degree. The overwhelming attractiveness and success of the Simon's Rock 3-2 program³ with Columbia University School of Engineering suggests how many see Simon's Rock not as an opportunity for four years of theoretical exploration apart from the world, but as a stepping stone on the way to authority and autonomy. And it is true that leaving home and fending for themselves, practically as well as intellectually, does enable many students at Simon's Rock to gain a remarkable self-assurance they carry with them into the world.

Today, the Bard Early Colleges, off-shoots of Mrs. Hall's idea, are housed in urban public schools and serve many students who might not otherwise attend college: they are predominantly students of color, many are Pell eligible, or the first generation in their family to attend college. For them, even more than for most current Simon's Rock students, four years of contemplation and reflection in a world apart from the pressures of career choice and ecological and socio-political concerns is not an option. That is not what early college has come to mean or why it is increasingly important.

While still living at home and completing high school diploma requirements, students at the Bard Early Colleges discover the challenges of college work and

their capacity to meet them. They confront conflicting interpretations and research on crucial topics in a situation that, as Mrs. Hall envisioned, encourages their coming to their own opinions through rigorous discussion and sustained exploration in writing under the guidance of a supportive, deeply-committed college faculty. For these students, exposure to the challenge of college work is invigorating and ultimately empowering; they know that a college degree is a necessary prerequisite for many desirable careers. They learn what the challenges of college are and discover their power to meet them.

To those of us starting these public Bard Early Colleges through the Bard High School Early College (BHSEC) model, it was initially hard to believe this transformation would be possible without the college campus, without taking students out of the traditional high school setting. Yet we discovered that within a traditional public school building, along corridors lined with lockers, a transformation does occur as the students experience what it is to have their opinions valued and challenged. By the end of the first semester of ninth grade, students recognize how their habits of thought and interaction have changed: “Before coming to BHSEC,” ninth-grader Tiara Ramos wrote in January 2001, “I would read something without putting any thought into it. I wouldn’t bother to reread something if I got confused. Now I know to look further into the text, to break the writing down into small parts, to go beyond just completing an assignment to fully understanding it.” Guided discussion among students is key, as this comment from another ninth grader makes evident: “Sometimes in class somebody talks about their interpretation of a piece, and I’m just in awe of such a different perspective. That is probably the most interesting part, learning about others’ ideas.” In Mathematics, the ninth-grade experience is structured to foster stamina in problem-solving, to strengthen students’ patience with sustained work on a problem they may need several days of thinking to solve, drawing on several processes they have learned. Writing about math and learning to explain their process of thought in problem-solving are often new for the ninth graders at the BHSECs.

Our Bard Early College experiences in a nineteenth century elementary school on the lower East Side of Manhattan, surrounded by the tenements Jacob Riis described, or on one floor of a junior high school in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, at a vacant middle school in Baltimore, or a former photo album factory in Queens all make it clear that Mrs. Hall’s metaphor of the House of Education is just that: a metaphor. It was not the House of Education that needed overhaul but what was going on inside.

The overhaul one sees at the Bard Early Colleges is philosophical and intellectual. It springs from a deep interest in and wish to foster the thinking of adolescents by people who themselves are devoted to ideas, to rigorous examination of assumptions and evidence, who challenge themselves to continue to learn. How does that differ from a good high school class? Or from the prep school world Mrs. Hall and I knew?

I think the disruption of traditional expectations is key: the removal of a barrier, the conviction that this discussion of Plato is the real thing, that there are no limits to what theories can be entertained, what discoveries may be made, how far one can go. The girls' schools Mrs. Hall and I knew, like other prep schools, were devoted to assuring that their students, usually children of privilege, would be well prepared for the challenges of college, indeed over-prepared. Redundancy was the failing of that system, and it undercut the excitement of learning that one experiences when truly challenged.

In 2001, in late spring, the first of the public Bard Early Colleges was approved, initially with no available site. Representatives from the New York City Department of Education escorted us to various underpopulated school buildings where they proposed our school could be housed, if only temporarily. We saw schools with locked bathrooms, with passing bells and public service announcements that interrupted class periods. We met principals anxious about preserving rigorous discipline and alarmed by our perceived naiveté. No bells? No hall passes?

Ultimately, we were offered that fourth floor of a junior high school in Greenpoint by a very seasoned principal who believed the chance to go on to our early college by climbing up a flight or two would be an important opportunity for his pupils. Yet even he blanched when, in describing Simon's Rock, we mentioned that following Mrs. Hall's example, we encouraged students to address us and the faculty by first names. "I certainly hope you won't do that here!" he said.

That first public Bard High School Early College opened on September 10, 2001 with 250 students, ninth graders and eleventh graders (who would soon become known as Year One college students). As at Bard College and Simon's Rock, orientation to the college culture began with Writing and Thinking Workshops in which students read, write, and share their thoughts in small, non-evaluative groups. Early the next morning, students waiting for the day to begin watched at our tall windows, as across the distant skyline, the first plane hit the North tower. That terrible day—challenging so many aspects of the life we all thought we knew—somehow made our challenge to the educational status quo seem an even more vital mission. Those first students, recruited during the summer after the regular school assignment process was complete, were many who had not been admitted to the selective high schools, new arrivals to the city or children whose families were not savvy about the complicated process by which school assignments are made in the New York City system.

"Turning and turning in the widening gyre," my ninth graders recited, "the falcon cannot hear the falconer. Things fall apart..."⁴ There was no way to cover over the questions, the conflicting interpretations, the fear and despair, to pretend to have answers. It was clear from those first days that this early college would not offer four years of contemplative retreat from the world for these students, as Mrs. Hall envisioned, but rather an urgent quest for knowledge and

understanding that would empower them to take up their roles in this challenging and terrifying world. We needed to help them believe in the possibility of a future, of peace.

Now, twenty years later, students at the BHSECs in Newark, Baltimore, Cleveland, New Orleans, and Washington D.C. as well as those at Bard's first public early colleges in New York City are driven, as those first students were by 9/11, by the threats of climate change, of systemic racism, of attacks on Asians during the pandemic, by the pandemic itself, to want to learn, to gain insight and understanding and authority, to build skills and perspectives with which to act in and on our dangerous and endangered world. To imagine.

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NOTES

- 1 Elizabeth Blodgett Hall, “The House of Education Needs Overhaul: The Theory Behind Simon’s Rock,” (Great Barrington, Massachusetts: Elizabeth Blodgett Hall Manuscripts Collection, Simon’s Rock Archives, Bard College at Simon’s Rock, reprint 1973), 6.
- 2 Hall, “Overhaul,” 5-7
- 3 The 3-2 program allows pre-engineering students to spend three years at Simon’s Rock and two years at Columbia University’s School of Engineering and Applied Science in New York City and receive a degree from both.
- 4 Lines 1-3 from “The Second Coming” by William Butler Yeats, originally published in 1920.